ESTHER DAMON

by

MRS. FREMONT OLDER

CALIFORNIA-WESTERN AMERICANA
Older, C. M (B)
Esther Damon.
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450

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To Aunt Jennie

From Walter

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CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1911

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BOOK I

THE WORST MAN IN TOWN

"What ought to be, can be."

—William James.

CHAPTER I

ORME agreed that what his wife said was true. As yet, not entirely awake, he accepted the blame: the sheriff's subordinates were in possession of the family home. This very minute they were in the act of dismantling it. The officials had arrived early in the morning from Ripon, the county seat. Evening would find him and his wife without shelter. And though he had reluctantly foreshadowed the consequences of his conduct—in fact, had thrust them into the crowded, unopened store-room of the unpleasant, and turned the key; now they burst the lock, and gravely walked out. He sat up in his wide mahogany bed as if to confront them and Alice. She stood before him and with extravagant gestures, in unlovely fury stridently set down the large figures of her husband's shiftlessness, prodigality, vice, until the total, even to her, was incalculable. Finally, she made sufficient pause in her incoherence to state clearly: "If you were a man, Robert, you'd get up and drive these people away."

He passed an uncertain hand over his gray, glazed face. Bewildered, he looked about him, started to rise, and in half-dazed soliloquy, as if fumbling for his thoughts, he said: "Has it really come to this? The place is worth at least twenty-five thousand

dollars, and it is mortgaged for only fifteen. They promised to give me another chance." When his blank, wandering eyes settled on his wife's faded, pretty face, he went on: "You poor Alice, it's hideous for you. I'm so sorry for you; but, my girl, it will come out all right in the end."

The frugal housewife, whose mind was narrowed to the point under discussion, was not to be deflected from her critical duty. She placed herself at the foot of the bed as if she held in her hand the scales of justice, indicating in numerals her husband's deficiencies. She had no diffidence about weighing the world. "Much good your pity does me, Robert. I hate pity. If you had only looked out, I shouldn't need pity from you or any one else. As it is you never learned that two from four leaves two. I don't believe you've looked at a clock since you came back from the war. Now, the sheriff is down on us just as I always told you he would be. But whiskey made such a coward of you that you shut your eyes and went pell-mell to ruin."

Everything about the man—his ashen, swollen face, the relaxed pores of his skin, the sunken, restless, dark eyes, the indeterminate mouth, the mobile eyebrows, the unsteady hands, bore witness to the truth of the words. But Orme had heard her reproaches too often. He would listen no more. In a voice so delightful that it might have belonged to another being—perhaps, indeed, it was a survival of the man who had been—he answered, "I'm very sorry, Alice, but you mustn't talk. I can't listen. I

want to be alone a little while. I'll go down stairs as soon as I'm dressed."

"I will talk," she answered in a flare of wrath. "I'll say just what I please. No one can stop me. Pa always said any one who married a man that didn't know how to do a useful stroke of work would end in the poor-house."

Alice disdained pauses. Her talk irritated the nerves like constant ticking on a window pane. The mannerism had developed with the years, but her husband was often unaware of it. Now the mention of her father, whom Orme disliked, rasped his patience. Taking up her note, he interrupted: "Very well, Alice, talk! Talk! Talk! For God's sake, talk! You have the disease of chatter, but I decline to listen." He groaned, sank upon the pillows and pressed them against his ears.

When a slammed door proclaimed her departure, again he moaned. He knew he should have borne her upbraidings. He deserved them. If Alice was without gentle graces and courtesies, she but reflected the meagre, barren village of Freedom where they lived. When he saw both her and himself as they were, he rose, tip-toed across the staring red Brussels carpet; turned the key in the door-lock; took a water glass from the table; searched the space between the mattresses; found one of the flasks there secreted and half-filled the glass.

It was a part of Orme's bacchanalian ceremony, one of his many devices for self-delusion, never to drink from a bottle. A bottle would have implied a

panting thirst, betrayed a longing more uncontrolled than he desired to acknowledge in the broad sunlight at nine o'clock on Monday morning. His self-respect had always been buttressed by his belief that he could drink spirits or let them alone; he usually drank as he did now, with large leisure and dignity. The last drop gone, his eyes brightened and his hands became so steady that he proceeded to shave. After a bath he poured out another glass of whiskey. He tippled this with increasing repose and grace. Later he completed his toilet.

Once dressed, he drank what remained in the bottle. Then unlocking the door, he stood, head poised, like a soldier at "Attention!" ready for battle. Slowly he descended the winding stairs into the long, narrow, white hall which ran through the centre of the house. In the dust stirred by the sheriff's men he could scarcely see. He found the strangers in the nursery of his infancy; in the parlors where the family festivities had been held; in the sitting-room where his mother's face still sweetly hovered; in the library, inhabited by immortal spirits which had flamed down the centuries and descended on him in their written words. Through the curtainless windows, the sun streamed on a chaos of chairs, tables, carpets, pictures—the accumulation of nearly a hundred years. All the doors were flung open, and Orme encountered a summer breeze from the lake as he sought Alice. His wife was unresponsive to the sound of his voice.

Finally he found her in her poor little world, the

kitchen, where she had hidden herself from the sight of the upheaval. Here she sat, her head on the table, as though the room were the stronghold of a fallen citadel where she must brave the sword. Her straight thin lips drooped pathetically as her husband entered. "I can't see my things thrown out of doors, Robert. I'm going to stay right here. These men shan't put me out. I won't leave. I can't."

Orme placed his hands upon her shoulders hesitatingly. "Don't. I can't stand seeing you like this. Why, Alice, even I don't feel as you do, though this place means much more to me than it can to you. After all, what's a house? Bricks and wood. We shouldn't desire anything too much."

"That's just it," she said, flinging back his arm, as she dried her eyes. "That's what you've always wanted to bring me down to, no roof over our heads. Now it's done, you say it doesn't matter. We're leaving bricks and wood. That's all you get out of books, new reasons for throwing your money away, new arguments about how grand it is to be poor."

"We aren't poor, Alice. We're young. We have each other."

"And a lot that is!" she answered.

With persistent tenderness he tried to take her hand. She drew angrily away. Hurt and depressed, he turned from her and entered the dining-room. The mahogany sideboard, with its silver and glass decanters, was the only article of furniture remaining

in the room. A glass of whiskey was already at his lips, when Alice opened the door.

"Robert," she protested, springing to his side, "you're not going to drink on a day like this."

"This is the day I most need it. One must have some kind of a companion, and whiskey never fails to respond."

With a quick, adroit movement she dashed the glass to the floor. Orme looked at her for an instant, frowned, filled another glass and slowly drank. Then, to aggravate the act, he repeated it, and turning to his wife, said: "You're a very foolish woman, a very foolish woman."

There were no tears in her eyes. They had become hard as gray glass. Standing against the wall, her hands behind her, she answered with contracted lips: "And you're a brute, a heartless brute. I'll never forgive you for this."

Orme's eyes had an unnatural stare. They seemed to protrude from his head. His cheeks were flushed; his thick black hair was dishevelled. As he drank his dignity increased and his affection for his wife renewed its courage. Somewhat unsteadily, he approached her and said, "Oh, yes, you will, Alice."

The sheriff's men entered the dining room to remove the sideboard; before they carried it away Orme seized a decanter and a glass. He was holding them, when from the verandah entered a short, broad-shouldered, thick-necked old man, with a small tuft of grizzled hair on his chin. He wore a blue broadcloth coat, a black stock, and a hat too

large for his head, sinking as it did almost to his ears which were half covered with shaggy hair.

"Why, pa!" exclaimed Alice Orme.

"Well, doggone it. If this ain't a mess, daughter," answered Ira Wherritt, gnawing his finger nails. "I heerd about it, and I come right up."

"I'm so glad you did," answered Alice. Orme covered the intruder with hostile, darkening glance.

"You know, Alice," the old man went on, "this match was your mother's doing and yours. It wasn't any of mine. I was always agin soldiers. But you women folks would have brass buttons, flags, and hurrahs."

Indignation and spirits loosed Orme's tongue to utter the words for a decade choked down. "Yes, brass buttons, music, and flying flags—that was all you knew of it. You stayed at home and shaved notes while we risked our lives to do away with the slave-pen, the whipping-post, the human auction-block, to give you back a nation without a slave, to keep alive this republic."

As Orme spoke, his rising color emphasized the scar of a sabre-cut on the side of his neck. On his father-in-law the fervor of patriotism was wasted. The skin of Wherritt's long, thin nose seemed too tight, and gave that feature a pinched look as he revealed his first-mortgage view of life. "Yes, interest was twelve per cent. I wasn't fool enough to get mixed up in any nigger war. I sent a substitute. There were too many youngsters like you who didn't mind a tramp soldier's life. All you fellows

in Freedom that went were ruined by it. Ain't done a thing but drink since you got back."

Orme's voice was like a roar of suppressed flame. "Yes," he said, "we were tramps, tramping through fire and hell till our feet bled. Vicksburg, Gettysburg, Libby prison—that was the kind of tramp's life we led. Of course we drank. Perhaps you would if you had retreated all day, and were ill from sleeping in marshes, if you'd seen three of your brothers blown to pieces, and buried them yourself. We did break the commandments, but we brought something back with us here," he indicated his breast. "You can't buy it. You know nothing about it, though it bears more than twelve per cent. interest."

"Beggars ride high horses, Orme," sneered the old man, pressing his lips together like a trap. "You'd be a smarter fellow if you hadn't so much learning and so many idees, and knew how to make an honest living and find a home for Alice. Of course, she always has a home with me, but I don't take care of able-bodied men."

The muscles underneath Orme's flesh quivered. "Mr. Wherritt, I shan't consent to your giving my wife a home. I can take care of myself and Alice, too.

Both Wherritt and Alice stared at the decanter to which Robert was clinging as if to an anchor. An understanding glance swept between father and daughter. "How can you earn a living," said Alice, "when you've spent your life drawing, reading, fussing in a little rigged-up play workshop over that

awful old stuff you call furniture? You never did a useful thing. We're as poor as church mice. How can we live?"

The sheriff's men were transporting the stove from the kitchen to the garden. Alice looked as if her sun had gone down forever.

"We shall live here, Alice," said Robert. "Our things needn't be taken away. I'll run over to Ripon and have a talk with the bankers. I'm sure I can arrange something. I give you my promise we shall be back in the house within a few days. Meantime we can board at Auntie Brewster's."

Orme's promises, so frequently offered as currency for deeds, long since had lost their value. Now adversity touched them with irony.

"For pity's sake, Robert, what are we to live on?"

"It's only for a week," he urged, "until I can see the bankers."

She was weary of his evasions, his subterfuges, his flabbiness of character. It mattered little if he was drunk or sober. Even when he was himself, rare of late, his nerves paid for the high tension of years. She was convinced that her husband was dry rot; the time had come when she must be guided by the sane thinking of her father. Presently one of the sheriff's deputies, a long, lanky man in overalls, interrupted: "I don't want to put you out, Mis' Orme, but my orders was to lock up the house after all the things were gone."

To Alice the words seemed echoes of something meant for other ears. Orme, pretending not to hear

them, turned his back on his wife and his father-in-law and tapped on the window. "Never mind," whispered Ira Wherritt, touching his daughter's elbow. "Get your bonnet on, Sis, and come home with me."

When Alice went to fetch her hat, Robert started to follow. A look from her stopped him. Alone she passed through the shabby, high-ceilinged rooms, and closed the white shutters of each window as one closes the lids of the precious dead. She was burying her pride. Ten years before, she had come to this fine old house, the bride of the great man of this little cross-roads farming centre of Freedom. The villagers had always imagined that Robert would marry some one from "way-off." When Alice Wherritt became Alice Orme the triumph affected her like wine. She forgot to return the calls of some of her school friends. To-day, with bitterness, she realized what they were smiling and saying. Here and there in her walk through the rooms she paused, leaned against the wall, forced back the tears, clenched her hands in anger and grief. What right had Robert to humiliate her?

Down stairs once more, face to face with her husband, she hated him. His flurried manner betrayed that in her absence he again had had recourse to the decanter. Whiskey emboldened him to place his hand upon her shoulder as they passed out of the house. "You don't really mean, little girl, to go home with your father. You're surely coming with me, aren't you, Alice?"

She looked up at her husband like the organically moral, unyielding, clear-headed young woman that she was. "I'll go with you when you get a home. Where can we live now?"

He spoke as if he were a ruler with a kingdom at his disposal. "Wherever you say. Choose."

She smiled scornfully. "I can't live in a burying-ground. That's all you have left in the world."

It was the stinging truth. When Alice was pretty vivacious eighteen, her small verbal nettles seasoned conversation; but these had grown to be ugly thorns marking the distance between the speech of an unthinking girl and that of a humiliated woman, careless of the wounds she made. He hesitated, trying hard to control his trembling nerves. Then wistfully he answered, "If you will remain with me, we'll work together. We'll get back the old place."

"You're always doing grand things when you're drunk, Robert. Why don't you do something when you're sober?"

"Plato says——"

"Don't talk to me about Plato," she retorted. "His name makes me sick. I don't read, thank Heaven. You spend all your time with books when you aren't drunk, but what good do they do you? You read philosophy and live like an idiot. Plato doesn't run your life. Pat Clancy, the hotel-keeper who sells you whiskey, does."

Alice's words gave him a shock. He thought clearly and against himself. He talked about the universe, but he did not control Robert Orme.

"Perhaps it's all true, Alice, but let me believe I'm better than I am. Help me. I'm not poor because I've lost my money. I'm poor because no one has confidence in me. I need a believer badly. Won't you be one?"

He knew that he might have made this appeal to a finer, more experienced being only to be denied. How then could he expect to move Alice who was burdened with no visions of the impossible? "Believe in you!" she repeated, "Believe in you! Believe in a shiftless drunkard!" The word was out; the horrible, rankling word held back during their years of prosperity. She knew its weight. She had carried it long on the tip of her tongue. The sentence was shot at him like a bullet. After a second she saw how Orme felt the hurt of it as it gnawed its way to his heart.

"I beg your pardon," he finally answered. "I may be drunk, but I'm not a drunkard."

"Alice, don't say anything to him," interrupted Ira Wherritt. "You're going home with me. You're not going to trust yourself with a drunkard. You'll always have a home with me, and I'll see that you, Orme, never get a cent of my money."

Robert always found his father-in-law intolerable —in manners, in speech, in his mean game of grabbing. "By all means, do see to it. I never cared for my own money. What use should I have for yours?" Then Orme turned to Alice: "I never told you how much I need you. It's more than you realize. Do remain with me. You laugh be-

cause I say I'll get the place back for you, but I will, Alice. I'll do anything if only you'll not leave me. You can make me do what you wish."

Touched by his appeal, she looked at her father before she replied. The old man warned her, "Every one must look out for himself."

"What pa says is so, Robert. I've never had much luck making you do things. If you had a glass of whiskey in front of you now, and you knew I'd die if you took it, you'd drink it."

She had not lived with him to be deluded at the end of ten years. Already he was shaking with thirst. He placed his hands in his pockets that she might not see his weakness. "That's your way," he answered, "of saying you're not my friend and you don't intend to be. I need a friend more than anything else on earth." His lips trembled, and his eyes were misty.

"I can't be a friend to you, Robert," she returned more gently, "unless you'll first be a friend to yourself and get sober."

"I know I'm drunk," he returned bitterly, "but don't remind me of it again. I know I'm wrong. That's why I need you. When we're right, we don't need to ask for friends. Friendship means to be loyal, right or wrong, but particularly when you're wrong. You're all I have left, and I want you. Won't you stay with me?"

Her glance, her attitude said "No." Robert wondered if he were not almost sober. Even on this languorous summer day a blizzard seemed to bite

his flesh as he tried to digest the meaning of his own words, "Then you're not my friend."

"How can you expect it," the prudent wife replied, "if it means taking chances with you?"

He turned the words over in his mind and replied: "We've lived together ten years, all through the twenties . . . now you leave me. When I was rich and drunk, you were my friend. Now that I'm poor and drunk, you're not." Under the influence of spirits his penetration was often sharpened. He slowly repeated the sentence until the thought percolated the layers of his perception controlled by alcohol. Finally, it pierced the consciousness that was wholly he. There the words registered themselves in his memory. "Very well, Alice," he said with a courteous bow, always exotic in Freedom, and now travestied by his condition, "I understand."

"What's the use of talking to a crazy man, Sis?" interrupted Ira Wherritt as he took his daughter by the arm. "Let's go home."

"Yes," she answered, "he's made me trouble enough without this."

Shabby tragedy was in Alice Orme's manner as she left the porch and with her father took the path which led diagonally from the garden to the village. Robert followed her with his eyes. For him the hour of despair had struck. "Alice," he called out, "I've been a pretty bad husband, but I give you my word I'll be better."

Even her back expressed disdain. "If you've got any mettle in you, you'll show it," Ira Wherritt

flung at Robert as he and his daughter continued their way under the pines. The branches of the trees excluded from the garden the noonday sun. For Orme this sheltered light was darkness.

"You may be sure you'll see it," promised Robert slowly, as he returned to the steps of the veranda. There, unbelieving, he sat looking at those departing. The gate clicked. The sound was a physical blow. His nerves crawled like worms. He watched till his wife disappeared. Then he took up the decanter. No longer fastidious as to his manner of drinking, detached from self-respect, he gulped the whiskey until his eyes closed in stupor. "Yes, I'll show you, Alice," he muttered thickly. "I'll show you if it kills me."

Presently his head hung limp on his chest. He snored heavily through parted lips. When the sheriff's deputies locked the doors and left the house, the decanter rolled away from Orme and broke into pieces.

CHAPTER II

For an hour Robert lay with life suspended, one foot bent under him exactly as he had sunk. Then, frowning and yawning, he woke, sat up, and rubbed his leg, benumbed by his posture. He looked at the shattered decanter, at the chaos of household belongings under the trees. His books, the pictures he had drawn, the tools he had used while experimenting in making furniture—these toys of his manhood, all, without order, had been cast out of the house by indifferent hands. It occurred to him that the strangers had been no more heedless about their work than he in his life. His gaze rested on the vagabond wire fence surrounding the garden, on the wide stone walk intergrown with weeds, on the unpainted brick house, on the uncertain porches with warped floors, on the half-hanging shutters, on the patched window panes. "Yes," he said to himself, "that's I. I'm everywhere. It's a photograph of me."

A nervous chill swept over his frame, and though the day was warm and drowsy, he turned up his coat collar. He had eaten nothing that morning. His head was burning, and his entire body was in a fever which made outcry for the magic of alcohol. Orme did not realize that he was trembling, that red spots had appeared on his dead, sunken cheeks.

His one desire was for the cool bar-room at Clancy's Ivy Green. Ah, the color of whiskey! The smell of it! How much it did for his brain! What sunrises it showed him! What sunsets! What bravery, what glory, what love, what beautiful women, what heaven it had given him—yes, and what hell! Indestructible happiness was in a whiskey bottle!

Under the mastery of the fever for Clancy's he hurried down the walk which Alice and her father had followed. Soon he lifted the broken gate, and struck the gravel path. Before him, in a cup of small hills, lay the village of Freedom, its church spires rising above the trees. Once, as far as he could see all the land belonged to his family. Now, on the right was his sole possession, a lot of two or three acres reserved by his great-grandfather as the family's last resting-place. When Robert looked at the great oaks and maples across the road, the old trees trebled in number. They seemed to sway. As he went on he recalled how the land had been sold, field by field. One lot had been spent at Clancy's. Another had been wasted in New York. Only a small meadow remained his own. And this would be his grave.

It did not occur to Robert that all Freedom, aware of his misfortune, was watching his unsteady gait and was ready to speak its mind,—both the evil and kindly disposed. Among the kindly disposed was the Widow Brewster, the boarding-house keeper. As Orme passed her modest cottage she stood on the steps, enveloped in an ample blue-checked apron,

her sleeves rolled about her elbows. She was fanning herself; she had just finished serving dinner to her boarders. Mrs. Brewster was a brawny, florid, heavy woman with bulbous, spectacled blue eyes, and a gentle mouth. Her masculine head and hairy chin gave her the appearance of being a survivor of the mothers of the American Revolution. To Orme she was "Aunty Brewster." He usually stopped to chat with her. Now he passed without speaking.

Mrs. Snead, wife of the Baptist deacon, was sitting on her porch. She called over the fence to the Widow Brewster, "And to think that boy et off china as thin as egg-shells every day of his life. Godlessness ruined him. His mother went to our church, but the old Squire read Tom Paine. When the Squire was senator down in Albany, they say—and I wouldn't put it beyond him—he shook hands with Bob Ingersoll. No family could prosper after that. The judgment of God is on this boy."

"God, nothing!" snapped the widow, for she was something of an intellectual bully. "It all comes of these city colleges and never learning a boy to work. Ithaca is a regular hell-hole, full of clubs. Clubs would ruin even a preacher, and they don't learn nothing but devilishness in colleges. I told Squire Orme so. I'd tell the Governor himself the truth. There never was a finer gentleman than the Squire, and Bob's a chip of the old block if he does drink. Old Wherritt's afraid Bob Orme's a-goin' to plant himself on him for the rest of his life. He needn't worry. Bob's a real nice boy." Mrs. Brewster's

emphasis carried her as far as the fence separating her lot from the Sneads'. "I was up to Orme's the night he was born. I nursed Mis' Orme. Bob always talks to me real friendly. He leaves groceries on my stoop and pretends he don't know where they come from. He never put on even after his father took the family down to Albany. They say his wife, that Alice Wherritt—I don't see what he ever see in her—they say she's goin' to leave him. I always said to Brewster I didn't marry his pocketbook, I married him. But these Americans hatched out in the past thirty years ain't got no backbone in 'em. They're all whitewash. They ain't like the old stock in Marlboro, Massachusetts. I suppose a stuck-up thing like Alice Wherritt will be real citified and get a divorce."

"O, Mis' Brewster," said Mrs. Snead, hobbling toward the fence for closer communication with her neighbor, "you don't say! She wouldn't get a divorce, would she? That would be awful. If she did I'd be ashamed to live in Freedom. What would Attica and Olivet and all the places way off say? They'd say we was fast, no better'n polygamists."

A few minutes later Orme burst into the bar-room of the white, ivy-covered tavern at the Four Corners. He had the joy of a young pagan entering the sanctuary of a temple of Dionysus. At last he could be himself. He walked straight to the bar. There stood the hotel keeper's son, Harry Clancy, a tall, athletic youth with romantically waving black hair. The moment Robert entered the door Clancy

reached for the whiskey. Orme drank and felt peace. He drank again. The blackness of his miserable existence disappeared. He looked about the room.

An old soldier of his regiment sat alone in a corner, whining over an empty glass. "Hello, Mearns," Robert exclaimed convivially. He crossed to the table and touched Mearns's shoulder. "What's the matter, old man?"

"They say I can never carry the flag again, Decoration Day, Captain, because I was drunk."

"Nonsense," laughed Robert.

Tears streamed down Mearns's cheeks. "They say so, Captain. Tom Tribble is going to carry the flag the Fourth, and he don't know how."

"Of course he doesn't. You'll carry it yourself I'll arrange that. What'll you have?"

"I'd like some beer, Captain."

"Beer!" scoffed Orme. "You're not following your regiment. You didn't desert at Cedar Creek." He turned to young Clancy, "Mearns wants beer. Scotch for me. You take something too, Harry."

Clancy filled the order; for himself he opened a box of cigarettes.

"It isn't only the flag, Captain," Mearns went on as he drank, "but the old woman made me sleep in the barn last night when I went home. She says I've got to live there unless I quit drinking." By trade, Mearns was a carpenter; but he seldom worked. His wife was a washer-woman and even her earnings he spent at Clancy's.

"Don't mind women, Mearns. My home is yours. There shouldn't be any difference between you and me. There isn't any *Mearns*. You're my brother. If you're not, there's no such thing as civilization." Robert took another long drink and placed his hand on the workman's shoulder as he continued, "We really aren't civilized, Mearns. Do you know what we are?"

Mearns always liked to hear Orme talk. It made him seem important. Robert, as usual, answered his own question. His tongue was thick, but his stream of thought flowed on in stammered words: "We're a lot of selfish, industrious insects, like those in a coral reef on the ocean bed of ignorance. Occasionally one of us rises to the surface for a breath of the civilization we talk about, but rarely see. We can't live more than a second in that air, Mearns. We're not used to it. So we sink back to our home under the sea. But I'll get away from the coral-reef, Mearns, and I'll take you with me."

The carpenter followed the kindly sound rather than the sense of Orme's words. "That's grand, Captain," he said.

Robert called for another round of drinks. The two men sat looking like the moral tragedies they were when Orme, in an increase of alcoholic exultation, went on: "Life should be poetry, Mearns. This is poetry. This is poets' corner." He turned to Clancy. "You're a poet, Harry. We're all poets."

Clancy, standing near them, smiled, and puffed

his cigarette, which he smoked to avoid drinking. Tapping Robert on the shoulder, he said, "Yes, I'm Shakespeare himself——"

He was about to continue when the eyes of all in the bar-room turned to the green-shuttered door which swung noiselessly open and admitted two women. One, past sixty, had rounded shoulders, deep, sad eyes, and a mouth that drooped. She wore a little black bonnet tied under her chin, and a black print dress buttoned straight up to the throat. The other was taller, more erect, with broader shoulders and of stronger mould. Her large, deep-set, heavy-lidded eyes were reddish brown. Her skin might have been made of creamy roses. Her lips were curved but firm. Her strongly marked chin just escaped a cleft. Masses of dark-red hair, parted in the centre over a wide, fine brow, hung in two heavy braids down her back. She had the aspect both of girl and woman. She was young and old, untouched by life itself; but something in her bearing suggested a pre-existence that had brought experience which would prevent her ever quite knowing the youth of the young. Her attire was austere as that of the older woman and matched it in design. She wore a dark blue print dress, not touching the floor, and a black bonnet with a brim shading her eyes.

The men looked at one another. Women here in Pat Clancy's! Why, they crossed the street to escape even the fumes from the bar-room. Women in Clancy's! The hotel for three generations had

stood for all there was of vice, of infamy in self-respecting Freedom. For fifty years, since the first Clancy opened his tavern, pulpits had fulminated against the public-house. The youth of Freedom had been warned that the first step to perdition was playing a game of billiards at Clancy's. From that iniquity few, they were daily admonished, had ever been redeemed. To-day the town was saying at Wherritt's, at Spear's, at Hood's, the shops at the Four Corners, in the drug-store, over fences, and from house-top to house-top that the Clancys had bankrupted young Robert Orme. Yet women had come here. And such women! They were as out of place as flowers. It was not surprising that in their presence the men were speechless.

The girl stood leaning against the wall, her hands behind her, while her eyes studied the linoleum on the floor. After hesitating a second, the older woman, concentrated on a single devoted idea, stepped forward to the men. Harry Clancy, standing behind the bar, gesticulated to Orme and Mearns. He tapped his forehead solemnly. He recognized the women as the wife and daughter of the Methodist minister, the Reverend Hezekiah Damon. Mrs. Damon had the bearing of one daunted by no duty. Stopping before the table where the men were seated, she said, "My brothers, we are Methodists. We go wherever there are souls to save. The Spirit calls us to the Ivy Green."

The intonation of her sweet, sanctified, treble voice indicated that she realized the extraordinary

nature of what she was doing. Daniel with lions glaring at him was no braver. Harry Clancy moved uneasily toward the intruders. The carpenter stared. Orme, to whom all dogmas were so many illusions of persons not yet out of their intellectual swaddling clothes, placed his glass upon the table and rose. Jesus of Nazareth and Socrates were his two great saints of history. He was in sympathetic relation with all who loved or served either. He regretted that their teachings had not permeated life. He knew Mrs. Damon, and he always felt better after their chance meetings in the street. Her fragrant, divine goodness set her apart from the rest of the world. In emulation of the mother of John Wesley, the minister's wife taught wherever she found listeners.

"I have come to the tavern, my friends, because so many of our young men lose their lives here," she began. "Years ago, when I was proud and worldly, God, to make me mindful of Him, took from me three little ones. Only one remained and this child too," she smiled in the direction of her daughter, "fell ill. We feared she would be taken home. I made a covenant with Jesus, if her life was spared, to devote the remainder of my days to soul-saving. I promised also to dedicate my daughter to the same holy work."

Mrs. Damon looked pleadingly at the girl who, awkward, embarrassed, reluctantly came forward and slowly placed her relaxed fingers in those of her mother. "The power of God must come down

here," Mrs. Damon went on, "and save this wicked Freedom. Oh, the vanity, the sin of Freedom!" She spoke as if she were a spectator of the tragedy of their lives. "My friends, turn from the error of your ways." Then she said, with exquisite humility: "I know I am a great sinner, but I have passed from death unto life. Have you?" She addressed Clancy, who smoked on without reply, vexed at being questioned by one he considered half-demented. The end of his patience was reached when Mrs. Damon said: "I'm afraid you've not been born again, my brothers, or you wouldn't drink. Young men, break your idols. Quench the fires of your lusts. Pray until you no longer have unclean lips or thoughts. Come to Jesus. He's better than tobacco and whiskey."

On account of the comfortless, repressive standard of the early Methodist faith, public sentiment toward it in Freedom was almost like persecution. Unpopularity had intensified the fervor of its professors into a passion. "Young men, leave this tavern," Mrs. Damon pleaded in a warm, tender voice. "I see you all asleep in a den of savage beasts. Awake." She turned again to Harry Clancy. "I pray for all you Catholics, my brother. Your soul especially troubles me, for it is written that no idolater has inheritance in the Kingdom of Heaven. Won't you come to Jesus?"

The confused young man looked at his watch. "I don't talk Jesus here, Mrs. Damon."

"And I," she answered, "talk of Him wherever I find sin."

Clancy freed himself by stepping out on the veranda. As he turned his back, Mrs. Damon's last word was: "The Lord won't abandon you even if you deny Him, young man. There is always hope. Ask Him." Her sad, sweet smile returned to Orme. "You are not going away too, are you, my friend? I don't talk like this because I wish to intrude on your privacy. I am nothing. The Voice of the Holy Spirit told me to come to you." Her quaint utterance had the calm of one who spoke with angels and with God. "I go where He directs. To-day He says you are sad and no one but Jesus can cure you of your love for strong drink."

"You're very good, Mrs. Damon, but I'm afraid what you're saying is out of the question." Orme found himself again returning to the world as it was without the mystic enchantment of spirits. "No power can help me," he added desperately. "I don't want to be cured. I want to stay drunk." Once more he craved that intensity of consciousness created in him by alcohol. His frayed nerves goaded him. "When I'm drunk, life is beautiful. I have everything. I am everything. I live in the world of the ideal, something those who are sober know nothing about. When I'm myself life is hell."

"Yes," she answered, "that is what God charges us for false beauty, hell." Robert's hands moved restlessly about his clothes. His forehead was moist. The minister's wife went on compassionately: "Why not give your life the true beauty? You can if you will try." He looked from one side of the room to the other, wondering how much

longer she would remain, how long before he could get another drink. "You don't mean, my friend, you never intend to do better? That would be too sad. The Lord wouldn't allow it. You must do better. Why, you've lived all your life in the house with the portrait of John Wesley. I've often gone there to pray with your dear wife. I've touched that portrait of Wesley. Perhaps Mrs. Orme told you I wished to touch something close to him." He nodded gravely. "I talked with Wesley of you. He promised to save you. Won't you let him lead you to Jesus?"

Orme's life for a decade had been sinking into shadows. On this sinister day Mrs. Damon's voice was like a beatitude. Her simple emotion of kindness seemed divine. Deeply touched, he answered gently, "I think not, Mrs. Damon."

Misinterpreting the gratitude in his tone, the minister's wife spoke more rapidly: "Of course you will, dear brother. Think of what you were when you came back from the war. People said if you had gone to West Point you'd have been as great as General Grant. They wanted to see you, to look at a real hero. You had your pick of the young ladies of the village. My poor boy, go over to that mirror and look at yourself now."

Instinctively he shrank back. "No, I don't bother myself about mirrors."

"If you did, my friend, you'd see sin written all over you. Do you never pray?"

"I'm afraid I don't think much about a Provi-

dence that interferes with the world plans for me. If I could it would be comforting, but, Mrs. Damon, imagine a God that can stand me."

"Won't you let us pray for you, Captain?"

Orme perceived the sympathy in her gentle eyes and modified his attitude. "If you think me worth your prayers, . . . it is kind of you to trouble."

Although his nerves squirmed and his mind failed to focus with precision, he noticed that the younger woman seemed weary, as of an oft-told story. So he was not surprised when the minister's wife kneeled down on both knees before the chair vacated by Clancy that she was obliged to pluck the girl's skirt and to repeat, "Esther! Esther Damon!"

The daughter sank to her knees. Then the mother reverently, fervently, with deep beauty, prayed, prayed as the first believers in their tents beneath the desert sky might have petitioned the Almighty. With bowed head Orme listened to Mrs. Damon's utterance. But he observed that Esther Damon's wandering eyes surveyed the scene through the lattice-work of her fingers.

CHAPTER III

ORME was exhausted by the effort to talk with Mrs. Damon. When, however, he had drained the glass on the table, he felt a renewal of strength. He said to Clancy who had been studying him with perplexity, "Bring me more of that stuff, Harry."

Closing his eyes Orme felt no longer defied by black calamity. His calamity was his wife, his life, the village of Freedom and that larger world it miniatured. He opened his eyelids for an anodyne. It was sparkling before him. After filling Mearns's glass he served himself. The sunshine streaming through the window took on new warmth. It beat down from a tropical sun. A voluptuous sense of summer possessed Robert, a summer he had never seen; which never ventured to appear in innocent, cloistered Freedom; a summer he had dreamed might exist in a magnolia forest on some golden Southern island. This sense moved him to exclaim to the soldier: "Whiskey, a lust, an appetite! That was what the preacher's wife said. Little she knows! The only trouble with whiskey is, there isn't half enough in the world. Cheer up, Mearns," he said, shaking the carpenter. "Don't look as if you'd lost every friend. If I felt as miserable as you when I drink I'd never take a drop. Be happy

with me. 'Let us fill ourselves with costly wine, and let no flower of spring pass us by. Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds before they wither.' I can quote scripture, too. It doesn't sound like scripture, does it? Let's crown ourselves with rosebuds."

The slow, phlegmatic carpenter was still sufficiently sober to regret seeing Captain Orme, whom he had followed for two years over Southern battlefields, now make a fool of himself. Orme continued to drink until time was turned backward ten years and there was never a chill, a harsh voice, nor an ugly thing in existence. In his fancy he had just returned from the war, ready and eager to live. Alice was a lovely fair-haired girl. They spoke to each other in the old tones. The old glances were exchanged. This was the evening she promised to be his wife. He took another drink and decided to go to Alice. She must be expecting him. He loved her. They loved each other. He wished to make her happy. He wished to make every one happy.

As Orme staggered to the door his feet seemed to be made of spongy cushions. He lurched into the street and clung to a hitching-post in front of Clancy's. To the amazement of the lame hostler who was lighting his pipe, Robert, thus anchored, viewed the Four Corners of Freedom: the farm horses drinking out of the trough in front of Wherritt's store; the loitering school children just dispersed by the bell of the Freedom Academy; Georg-

iana Posey, the milliner, with clusters of brown curls, and a simpering smile, who gave him a swift, terrified look as she passed into Hood's merchandise store opposite Clancy's. In this attitude he endeavored to get his bearings in an unreal, chaotic blur of dancing shadows. Presently, he moved onward, only occasionally reeling. He was sustained by the knowledge that he was going to Alice.

The gate before the white, bank-like, solid-looking Wherritt residence did not open in response to Orme's uncertain fingers, and so he entered through the drive way. As he mounted the steps of the small, inhospitable porch and pulled long at the bell, he saw Ira Wherritt, coatless, clipping a hedge near the barn. There was no response to Robert's demand for admission. He rang long, angrily. Silence. He rang again. No answer. He tugged violently at the bell and wrenched the brass knob from its socket. Then he beat upon the door with such vehemence that even Aunty Brewster over the way came to her window. Again silence. He tried to open the door. It was locked. He threw his body against the door. If they did not open he would break into the house and take Alice away by force. She was his wife. She belonged to him.

Suddenly the door yielded. Frowning, Ira Wherritt confronted him.

"Well?" That was how the money-lender addressed a poor man.

"I want to see Alice."

"She won't see you."

"She must."

Wherritt glared at Orme as if he had refused to pay usury. "If you come here again, I'll call in Constable Diggs and have you arrested for begging."

Orme dropped the door-knob. "You'll have me—" Had he sunk so low? "Why, you old thief—" he said, in a frenzy of rage. Then he stopped and went abruptly down the steps, mumbling, on his way to the tavern. "He'll have me arrested because I want my wife." The azure went out of the sky. The sun was no longer tropical. What was the use? He would drink always, and then sleep. Then drink again.

Pat Clancy and his son, Harry, sitting on the veranda, feigned not to observe Orme entering the unoccupied bar-room. None came to serve him. He furiously hammered the bar with his fists until some of the glasses rolled upon the floor and broke. The noise brought the heavy figure of the elder Clancy to the threshold.

"What in hell are you making all that racket for, Orme?" growled the bloated, red-faced tavern keeper.

Robert stood leaning against the bar. "I want a drink, Clancy," he replied, resentful of the premeditated indignity of the Clancys. Since coming into his inheritance Orme had for the most part maintained the tavern. The innkeeper filled the glass, but as Robert raised it to his lips, his hand shook until part of the contents spilled upon his

coat. After emptying a second, third, and fourth glass he sat before the table and asked for more.

"Say, Orme—" said Pat Clancy, with the bottle in his hand.

"Mr. Orme, Clancy," corrected Robert.

"Well, say, Captain, you're damned high-toned all of a sudden. Who's standing for all this stuff you've taken?"

"I am, sir," answered Robert, raising his head only to allow it to sink to his breast.

Clancy stroked his long, silken, iron-gray side whiskers, his manifest glory, and said, "Not in the Ivy Green any more. I'm willing to call the bill I've got against you square if you'll get old Wherritt to go security for you."

Anew, Robert became acquainted with the squalid infirmity of poverty. "My name is as good security as there is in Freedom."

Clancy glanced at the sheriff's notice on the wall announcing the public auction on the following day of Orme's live-stock. Plainly in his mind there were two sides to the question. "I wish the Ivy Green could run on air, but we've got to have money."

Robert's voice was thick and hoarse as he stammered: "On considering it, Clancy, I can't afford to be seen here any more. I'll have my wine sent from the city. Good-day."

With the assistance of a chair Orme rose, his hat awry. Both father and son smiled as Robert tottered westward, resting at intervals against fences and the old black-bodied maple trees. With great

difficulty he proceeded toward what yesterday was his home.

After passing the straggling cottages on the edge of town, Orme began the toilsome ascent of the hill. Once at the top, as he looked to the left, his stupefied intelligence recognized that he still had a right to the few acres of land long before reserved by his kinsmen as the burial-place for their descendants. It was on an elevation quite ten feet above the road. The height seemed insurmountable to Orme. But here was something belonging to him. From this spot no one had a right to eject him.

Effort after effort, he put forth in a vain endeavor to clamber up the perpendicular surface. Only through a dumb animal stubbornness did he at last find himself clinging to the fallen stone wall at the top by which the lot was enclosed. He stumbled heedlessly through the wild-rose bushes and seated himself on a thick tangled bed of myrtle. He turned his face toward the sun.

"The sunset is just as beautiful as ever," he muttered. "I can look at that." But his heart surged with bitterness against the injustice of the world. "Damn the very words rich and poor. I hate the sound of them. I'll abolish them and substitute happiness." His exaltation was soon swept away by actuality. "No, I can't do it. Some master-mind will. I shan't live to see it." The black barbarous centuries inevitable before the great hour should arrive bore down upon Robert. He sank backward in the dumb oblivion of drunkenness.

CHAPTER IV

BEFORE Orme opened his eyes the following morning, without realizing why, he gave a deep sigh like a groan. His aching head lay lower than his feet. In his suffering he wondered for an instant if he had been wounded. This wasn't that beautiful, tearless world he had always dreamed of. From the chaotic fragments of his brain he tried to recall what had happened the previous day.

Out of the thicket of yesterday one fact defined itself: he had lost his companion of ten years. Alice was no longer with him. From this nucleus Robert retraced the hours to the visit of the sheriff's deputies in the morning and the eviction from his home. As a final test of fortitude came the ignominy of being turned out of the Ivy Green. How he came to be here in the burial ground he could not surmise. On the whole, he was glad of this mystery. Knowledge would bring him neither credit nor solace. Alice's barbed words darted through his memory. He accepted Alice's truth. He had lived like a fool. Pat Clancy ruled him. He was an alcoholic slave.

Orme realized this was deplorable because he had known better. The splendid qualities of his forbears, his liberal education, his love of the noblest

human attributes must have contributed a moral insight quite wanting in the crude ruminations of Freedom. And yet, notwithstanding his subtler distinctions of right conduct, insidious vice had swept him in the wrong direction, while he, Robert Orme, stood looking on like an impotent spectator.

Sometimes, it was true, he had protested; again, half resolved, never wholly resolved, never commanded himself. He had usually done the worst that lay in his power. Was he to continue this contradiction between knowledge and action? Was his will palsied? Had he no character? Was he to pursue his useless, dreamy, purposeless existence until he should come to this lot to remain?

Robert sat reflecting until a chill seized him. His teeth chattered. His hands trembled. He knew his diseased nerves were crying out for reinforcement. "Yes," he said, as he felt himself sink under the assault, "what Alice said was true. I'm a drunkard."

But no sooner had he made the confession than the words struggled to wriggle away, to deny themselves. No, he was not a drunkard. He drank because he needed a stimulant. He drank with the old soldiers for conviviality, for the sake of the days when they were together on the battle field. He drank to resolve not to drink. His entire mental infirmity summoned a score of perjured witnesses to forswear the truth; but his reason held its own. As a small force of patriots will often overcome an army of mercenaries, the truth was not to be gain-

said. It was there in his unfastened boots, in his grimy hands, in his clothing reeking with whiskey.

"Yes, I'm a drunkard," he repeated, "kicked out by every one. I'm the town drunkard." He held the thought before him in a kind of triumph. He wished to force himself to face it. He must not allow it to slip away. He must adopt it, affirm it. In this unwonted act he found strength. He tried to take one more step forward and face the crisis; but so great was the opposing force that it was as if within him were two beings. One commanded the other. "Stand up, man. Let me examine you. What is your name?"

He rose with difficulty, swaying from weakness. "Robert Orme."

"What is your occupation?"

"I'm a tramp."

"What excuse have you for living?"

"None."

"Of what use have you ever been?"

"None. I once thought that to kill men in order to make men free was some use. Now I doubt it."

Search as he would, his life seemed useless as the wine-bottles he had drained. Behind him was blackness. Into that he could not sink. He must go forward. His mistakes in the past should guide him. It was the first time he had opposed his appetite, and there in the high light of his consciousness he in this wise condemned himself: "Robert Orme, I give you one more chance. I

sentence you to go without stimulants of any kind for twenty-four hours."

These words spoken, his will flagged as though disease were in every cell of his body. He sat down. Soon, however, he rose. His lips, his tongue, his throat were burning. He must have water. Now he recalled that there was a spring on the lot. Here was the first site chosen by the Reverend John Orme when he came to northern New York from Maryland early in the century. The chestnut and oak trees had been left standing and the field appeared to await a dwelling. Orme walked to the farther end of the cemetery. Bubbling out of the ground was the spring which had attracted the attention of the pioneers. He kneeled down and lapped the water. Could he never quench the parching thirst? When he was able to swallow no more, he moistened his handkerchief, bathed his head, his temples, his eyes, and held it at the base of his throbbing brain. Robert had no sense of hunger, but rather of weakness. Only when his eyes fell upon a wild cherry tree scarlet with fruit did he realize that he would like to eat something sour, hot, and pungent. Standing under the small low tree he refreshed himself with the bitter juice.

Afterward he walked about the lot. In one corner of the field he came upon the ground where were interred the finer, stronger spirits of his kin, each of whom had left behind him noble traditions. The largest head-stone was that of the first pioneer. Unshaken by the wintry blast, it had stood upright

for nearly a century. Reading the epitaph, "He did the best he could," Orme recalled that in his earlier judgment those had seemed tepid, parochial words. This morning they were a reproach to him. Near at hand was the modest monument to the second Reverend John Orme. Farther to the rear lay Robert's own parents. Beside them were three small stones marking the empty graves of his brothers who marched away to war with him, but who did so much better than he. They never returned. He dared go no farther; dared not shut in between them and himself his recollection of them, and his affront to them as he now appeared. Fleeing from their dust he passed in the opposite direction.

With such rapidity did he overleap the fence that he surprised himself hurrying down into the road. Where was he going? Into the village with the hope of finding whiskey at the drug-store. He stood amazed. Had he no self-direction? If alcohol had been a reasoning being it could scarce have acted with better intelligence in undermining his will. He called a halt; but urged by the uncanny, treacherous undercurrent of his nature, on he went. Only an hour since he had resolved never to drink again. In sixty minutes his strength had been beaten down. Once he had thought to obtain self-government by one mighty effort; but the years were leagued against him. What could his poor volition do against the bent of time?

Again he called a halt. His appetite obeyed the lash of the whip of his will. A thrill of power shot

through him as he obtained his first victory. Hesitating he stood, his weight on his forward foot. Was this the golden moment in which he should free himself from himself? His moral knowledge came out of the shadows where it had been hiding and warned: "This is your last chance. Now you measure your manhood." He wavered for a second, seeming to go forward. Then, suddenly, with a slow grim heave of the entire will, he turned and walked in the opposite direction.

This desperate push for self-mastery was the first time he had resisted the full driving force of his vice. Of such far reaching significance was the act that it pervaded his entire existence. Yet the moment was not the magical one in which he had dreamed he should find freedom, but a gray, dingy moment in which the world went black. His feet were weighted as he dragged them away from the town. At the top of the hill he breathed heavily and paused.

Westward was a lake, sparkling in the sunlight. The smiling placid water summoned him. Swimming had been his boyhood sport in summer; now he yielded to the azure lure of the water. His first step along the road through the clover and sweet-smelling orchards—launched him in an existence of changed intention. As he proceeded he felt himself grow and strengthen. This slight resistance to the habit of years gave his will a motive power, helped him hew a path through the jungle of his nature.

Swimming washed some of the tavern out of him.

He felt calmer and dozed in the sun. When he woke once more he seemed to have a new will centre. He refused to look at himself as a failure. He could not be a failure while he had youth. His throat swelled as he reflected that some of the best years of his life might still be his—years to shape and mould after the pattern in his glowing imagination. But there was Alice—he would yet make her happy.

How much youth still remained in Orme that he could again have faith in a nobler future for himself! A smile of hope lighted his young-old gray, seamed, flabby face as he went toward Freedom. He had gone nearly a mile when he met a band of wandering players who a few days before had given a tent production of Uncle Tom's Cabin in the village. They were travelling in wagons to Attica and were laughing. It seemed to him strange that any one could laugh to-day. As he gazed after them the sand in the road was blown hither and thither by the summer whirlwind. He sadly likened himself to that dust.

At the top of the hill, looking down into Freedom, he saw a crowd gathered in the garden of his former home. The auction sale of his belongings was being held. Suddenly he recalled his need of a barber. Half-way down the descent to the town he stopped in alarm. Again he was possessed by an alcoholic delusion. The sight of the auction crowd had driven him pell-mell into the village for whiskey. His self-discovery was a shock. He sifted himself

in disgust. Was he worth saving? Was it not better for him to shrink, nerveless from the fight, as unfit? Of what use was such quicksilver as he? Was the great expenditure of strength with a doubtful result worth making? Alice was right; he read philosophy as self-indulgence and he lived like a fool. When his need was so great, which one of all those friends, ancient or modern, whose beautiful thoughts had been a sanctuary where he took refuge from the ignorance of Freedom, could help him to new life? Orme passed them in review. Philosophy wasn't worth a damn when he needed it.

But there was a hand stretched out—the hand that wrote these words, "Whatever ought to be, can be." The sentence had a magnificent redemptive meaning for Robert. He stood repeating, "Whatever ought to be, can be." Tears filled his eyes. These syllables compelled service of his feet, his senses. They became a passionate, flaming faith. With their aid he turned back, and mounted the hills—this time with ease.

"Once! Twice! Three times! And gone!" He heard the auctioneer call. He could listen no more. He lowered his head and went toward the lake repeating, "Whatever ought to be, can be." But the auctioneer's voice followed him, "Going! Going! Gone!" Orme came back, and with every step thorns seemed to press into his flesh. Yet he redescended the hill, passed to the very edge of the village, then manfully turned round. Thus he wearied himself till twilight when he saw the people

leaving the old garden. They had come from all directions and were present in great numbers. The Orme auction was a fashionable event.

Robert saw the family carriage driven away, the carriage that had been the Sabbath spectacle in Freedom when Squire and Mrs. Orme and their four sons went to the Baptist church, the squire leaning on his gold-headed cane and bowing like a beloved king. Robert's horses were headed for Attica. His cattle had been purchased by a dairy-man. He wished to avoid the faces of their new owners. Creeping up into the burial ground, he seated himself under a cherry tree and held his head. Ten thousand devils were tearing at him. He clenched his hands, frowned and lined his face. What was the use? Why resist the drift of the tide? How could a drowning man swim against the force of the stars? He wished he believed in prayer.

"This is hell," he said, "the hell of failure and wrecked ideals. But there's one thing no auctioneer can sell. It is 'What ought to be, can be.' That belongs to me."

CHAPTER V

ORME'S self-imposed sentence had expired; one whole day without a drink. He had defied temptation. His will had not been destroyed. It had slept. Now, at last, awake, refreshed, it took its rightful place and assumed command of his life. He knew habit would not relax its grip without further resistance. Perhaps the four and twenty hours struggle would at times seem futile; but, at least, it was not ignoble. He had made an effort. He had battled against his senses. One day belonged to him.

The preceding night Orme had slept under a cherry tree, or rather he had suffered and dozed and fought. This morning, as he briskly washed his face at the spring, he paused and ground his teeth. Why did those sparrows make such an infernal noise? Soon he realized that he, not the sparrows discorded with this lovely dawn. He went on with his bath. His mind glowed with the joy of brief self-conquest. He felt capable of enormous things. He would strangle that beast within him. He would lead a clean, useful existence. Yet while he mentally re-created his future, he wavered. He wondered if his was more than the optimism of the drunkard.

Now a new kind of ambition came to Robert. Like most men deprived by inherited fortune of the discipline of work, he had always looked at life through distorted, flattering lens. Two days previously he found out what it meant to be poor. For the first time he learned that the big demand of even obscure little Freedom was for credit at the bank. Alice wanted money. Ira Wherritt pinched, starved, cheated for it, and a church pew made usury look religious. Pat Clancy coined into money the tears of women, the food of children, the blood of men. Since this was the universal ambition, one everywhere negotiable, Robert determined to have money —money for Alice.

With all haste he sprang over the old stone wall, lightly leaped down the hill, ran across the road, and up the steps leading into the large, neglected, tangled garden. Here he paused. He was confronted by too much that had passed from the spot. He had steeled himself against appetite, but he was helpless against throbbing memories which made the garden seem like his own tomb. He was glad when he came within sight and speech of Carter, an old negro slave whom he had brought back with him from the war. Carter had not deserted him.

"I mos' certainly am powahful glad to see you, Cap'in Orme," said the colored man. "I mos' certainly am. I been busy packin' all dese heah things. I reckon yesterday was de grandest auction dey ever had in dis place."

In the order brought by Carter out of the upheaval

of books, pictures, and bedding, Orme recognized faithful service. "It was good of you to remain, Carter. I knew I could rely on you."

Carter was one great grin. "I toted dese boxes up here on my back yesterday, shuah I did. It's a-gwine to rain. Things get spoiled in de wet. We kin put de boxes in Mr. Wherritt's barn."

"You're right, Carter," Orme agreed. "Everything must be stored immediately, but there's no room in Mr. Wherritt's barn. As soon as I change my clothes I'll go down to the village and find a place."

The negro, hammer in hand, was about to nail a cover on a box of pictures when Orme's glance fell on the original portrait of Wesley. Robert looked at the strong, inspiring countenance. He recalled Mrs. Damon, and the supernatural spirit with which she had invested the picture. He was well aware that the canvas possessed high value. In his boyhood it had been exhibited in large cities. Squire Orme guarded it as the treasure of the household, and declined to allow it to fall into the hands of prowling art vandals. Robert himself not long before had fatuously stood in the way of its sale to a New York collector. Now it came to him that the offer of the antiquarian might enable him to emerge from his difficulties in more ways than one. In addition to material gain, the sale brought a prospect of a breath of air away from Freedom, the limits of which pressed hard upon him. Yes, he must get away from the village. He would go to-day.

Carter had been left by the Ripon bankers in charge of the place until the land could be leased or sold, and presently Orme went to the old servant's room to change his clothing. Clean linen and outer garments, not saturated with whiskey, made him look less like an aging Hamlet who had been drunk for a decade. Hurrying back to Carter he found the negro with the old family Bible in one hand and a bill of currency in the other. Carter was staring open-mouthed at them.

"Look heah, Cap'n! I dropped de Bible and dis money fell out. 'Pears it come straight from heaven."

At first Orme thought this Carter's ruse to compel him to accept some of his savings, but he saw at a glance that the old Bible was filled with family mementoes. The bill was very old, and had probably been placed there by his mother. He was the modern man, quite untainted by superstition, but for a moment he seemed to hear his mother's voice. With that gentle woman's blood in his veins, her memory in his heart, her sacred influence on his soul, how had he come to this? She seemed to plead with him to go on with his effort. So shaken was Orme that to prevent Carter seeing his emotion he bent over the Bible. He pretended to be interested in the family names inscribed there in Latin during the seventeenth century in England. When he remastered himself he laid down the volume, saying, "Carter, take care of that Bible. It's very interesting and precious."

Orme rolled up the bill. A minute before it had

seemed divinely sent by his mother. Now he was tempted to destroy it. Money was only the means for a carousal with his friends. Why not the beautiful unreality of drunkenness? Dismay crowded upon him as his frail will was buffeted about. Clearly he was more Robert Orme in weakness than in strength. Cunningly, insidiously did his desire for drink spur him to lie to the black man.

"I'm going to New York, Carter, to sell that Wesley portrait. When I come back I'll build a house on the lot across the way. I think I'll set up a select school, then I'll take you back, Carter."

"Yes, sah." Carter listened to Orme's rapid words, bowed in his best plantation manner, and wondered what more was to come.

"And, Carter, I wish you'd pack me enough clothing for a week and leave the bag at Mrs. Brewster's."

"Yes, sah."

"We'll store the furniture in her barn."

"Yes, sah."

"You'll find me at her house within an hour, Carter," Orme said in departure. "I'll leave the picture for you to bring. Be sure not to miss me."

"Yes, sah."

Again the subtle vice gripped Robert. His new will was throttled as he went toward the village. The words, "I'm a drunkard," yesterday so effective a warning, now no longer served as a deterrent. His new controlling formula, "Whatever ought to be, can be," was as handwriting on water. He

would give himself to the wine god, that spirit of fire and dew. What offered more sublimity to dull existence?

Under a large elm-tree half-way to his goal, the drug-store, he encountered the grenadier-like figure of Mrs. Brewster. She was returning from her morning's marketing. So feverish was Orme's haste that he removed his hat with stinted courtesy. For an instant she stood inspecting him.

"Ain't my house as good as a tavern, Bobby?"

"I was just coming to see you," he answered.

"No, you wasn't neither, Bobby, but come right in now."

"As soon as I go to the drug-store"—he said, moving forward.

"No!" 'No' was the widow's favorite word. "You come instanter with me. Carry my market-basket." Holding him by the arm she led him through the garden to her porch. Only the holly-hocks and the morning glories and Orme knew of the heart hidden under Aunty Brewster's militant manner.

As Robert opened the green-screened door of the sitting-room, he said, "Indeed I was coming, Aunty. I wanted to ask your advice."

She untied her bonnet and grunted. "Oh, ye did, did ye?" She squinted at him. "Well, my advice to you is, you'd better take the pledge. Have ye took it, Bob?"

"Yes, a kind of pledge, Aunty."

"Well, take a real one and keep away from that

tippling house." Mrs. Brewster carried her bonnet into the bedroom. "Now, what do you want to eat?"

"Nothing, thanks. May I have a pot of coffee?" Blazing as he was with alcoholic energy, he wondered why he did not break out of the door.

"You shall eat, Bobby," she said, placing on the table before him mince pie, cakes, and cookies. "You look awful piddlin'."

"Really, I care for nothing but coffee and rolls," Robert meekly protested. He had forgotten that to decline food from Mrs. Brewster's kitchen was sedition.

"What's the matter with you, anyway, Bob? I suppose you like your victuals all quiddled up. You used to like my cookin'," she retorted as if she believed the worst Freedom was saying of him. According to Mrs. Brewster's thinking, not to eat pastry for breakfast, was incipient depravity.

"When I was a youngster I did like cookies."

While she prepared the coffee, Robert heard her sputter: "Colleges ruins every one who goes to 'em. Ketch me near 'em. Mr. Brewster was the best carpenter in Freedom. His head wasn't mussed up with learning. He worked on the finest buildings in town." Soon she emerged from the kitchen carrying a great pot of coffee and a plate of rolls. "Are you too tony to eat these?"

"They're just what I want." Orme placed himself at the table, but he did not eat. He drank cup after cup of strong coffee. "May I store our furniture in your barn, Aunty?" he asked.

Her reply was another question, "You and your wife ain't a-livin' together, be ye?"

"Not that, Aunty," Orme replied in embarrassment. "Alice isn't feeling very well, and she's stopping at her father's house until I get back from New York."

Mrs. Brewster smiled skeptically. "I suppose New York's one of your jokes."

"No, I'm going on business this afternoon. I take the two o'clock stage."

The widow leaned back in her chair. "You're going to New York!" She took a drink of water. "Why, Bob! Why don't you tell me you're going to Jerusalem?"

Not more than six persons in Freedom had travelled so far as New York. The last venturesome person was Dr. Yates, the village physician. A prejudice against travel had existed in the town ever since Jeremiah Leak was killed by the Ripon "Accommodation," ten years before. Her equilibrium regained, Mrs. Brewster continued: "Well, I suppose it will do you good to get away from this racket for a spell. It will be a change if only from mutton to skunk." Mitigating circumstances arose in her mind. "I don't know as I can blame anybody for wanting to ride all day in the stage or on the cars," she said. "If you want my barn, Bobby, you can have it. How are you making out? Can't I get you some ham and eggs?" On his declining, the widow conjectured: "I suppose old Wherritt won't let you have his barn. If I was as tight as

him—old skinflint! These girls nowadays are trash. Send 'em to a city school and give them music lessons, and that finishes 'em. Highty-tighty! Give me silk and velvet or I'll go home to pa. I never left Brewster even after he broke his leg. Didn't I take care of him till he died?"

"There never was any one like you, Aunty."

The widow pretended to disdain compliments, but a pleased smile played about her mouth. "I tell you the old stock in Massachusetts was different. Not a shilling for you or the barn, Bob. That would be a nice shine, wouldn't it? I'd be as bad as old Wherritt to take money from you after all the milk and fruit and groceries you've give me for years. Keep your money, you'll need it. Have some more coffee."

When Mrs. Brewster went into the kitchen Robert heard a gentle tap on the screen door. There stood Mrs. Damon and her daughter. He imagined they had come to pray for Aunty Brewster, who as a Universalist was considered by the Methodists as "lost" as the Roman Catholics. Orme opened the door and admitted the women.

"My friend," said Mrs. Damon, her face shining like the face of a saint, "we've been looking for you. You're stronger to-day, I see, but you're still troubled. You're sad, my brother. You're in danger. You have need of higher help."

All other religions, Robert reflected, might be dead superstition, but this woman's really lived. Her kindliness was a beautiful grace, and her speech es-

caped impertinence because of her deep, quiet conviction that she was under divine guidance. "We have all prayed for you," Mrs. Damon continued. "My husband, my daughter, and I have prayed for you." Esther, who towered above her mother as she did over all the women in Freedom, averted her face, but Orme recognized her as a big, fine, natural force. "We fasted and talked with God about you, Captain."

Orme was exquisitely conscious of every phase of the girl's beauty; the lines, the coloring, the wide range of expression. Again he looked at Esther. Deep in her transparent skin he noticed a blush. He hoped she would speak. He wished to hear the voice of the woman whose dark red hair contradicted her grave, long-lashed eyes; whose vivid, brilliant loveliness protested against her severe, monastic apparel; whose entire person, flashing on him like a page out of history was at variance with little, crude, dingy, characterless Freedom. But she was silent. In the appalling conflict of yesterday there had been manifest to Robert no sense of companionship; but it touched him finely that he had not been alone. "Perhaps, Mrs. Damon," he answered, "although I didn't realize it, you helped me. You are very good, and you"—he included Esther in his expression of gratitude, "to lend yourselves to the weak. . . . I'm afraid I wasn't worth the trouble."

The older woman shook her head, and her sweet, veiled smile disclosed to him, that, in her youth before she had begun to bear on her shoulders the

heavy cross of her Redeemer, she must have been very lovely. "Don't thank me, my friend," she replied. "Every morning I ask Jesus to let me live in His way. Yesterday His voice was as distinct as mine is now: 'Fast and pray for Robert Orme who is in temptation.'" He repressed a smile at her primitive belief, but she did not notice it and went on. "Something tells me you are better than you were day before yesterday."

To Orme, Jesus was only an ideal to work toward. He had never known subjectively the emotion of religion; but when Mrs. Damon spoke, there was no longer contention or struggle within. His spirit calmly presided over his body. "Any one should be better for God's best medicine," he answered. "I'm sure it is kind words."

"And you are not going to that wicked tavern, are you, my friend?" the minister's wife pleaded. The girl quickly turned her eyes toward him. Robert observed that, though the countenance of Esther Damon was capable of expressing everything, as yet it was unawakened.

At this moment Mrs. Brewster returned to the sitting-room and her native belligerence burst forth. Before her visitors had time to explain, she said, "No, Mis' Damon, ye can't pray for me, now or never. When I want any praying done I'll do it myself. Who are ye, anyway—Mrs. Jehovah?"

Esther quietly left the room and stood on the porch, but Mrs. Damon smiled pityingly at the widow like one whose devoted desire was to illu-

mine, persuade, and take possession of souls. "I'm one who loves you. I would give my life to save you from desiring temporal things, from the gold breast-pin, the gold earrings you are wearing, to save you from hell."

For years the widow had not entered a house of worship. Mrs. Damon's unfaltering efforts to guide Mrs. Brewster into the spiritual kingdom were by the village thought praiseworthy, but destined to failure. There was no Universalist church in the village, but the widow dearly loved to fly the flag of her unpopular creed.

"Hell!" she scathingly returned. "Whoever invented such a place to scare fools with? Everybody is going to be saved."

The idea of "universal redemption" destroyed for Mrs. Damon the value of the sacrifice of the Man of Sorrows; but practised as she was in patience, she answered gently: "You would like to think there is no hell. I see it right here before me. It's a great burning lake. God needs a hell for those who doubt and trample on His name."

"Don't talk to me, Mis' Damon," said the widow, clenching her hands. "I guess I know as much about the Almighty as you do, if you are a minister's wife. Ministers! Churches! Humph! You might just as well go into a store as a church, if you ain't got your pocket-book with you."

"Ah, sister," chided the plaintive voice of Mrs. Damon, "how you misjudge us. Let the Holy Spirit come to you here."

"There's the door. Get out." Then Mrs. Brewster subjoined this annihilating passage of scripture, "'Pray not as the hypocrites, on the corners of the street to be seen of men.'"

"'Wherever one can lift up holy hands, there let him pray,'" promptly quoted Mrs. Damon.

The visitor kneeled down before the door and Mrs. Brewster raged, "You'd better go home and hoe your own house and make a decent dress for yourself. Your other girls died because you was so busy praying you couldn't take care of them, and this one looks like a beggar."

Indeed, not unlike a superb pagan queen who had laid aside her fantastic head-dress, her strange blazing jewels, her robes, to appear in the guise of a beggar, Esther Damon stood within range of Orme's vision. He felt certain the girl had heard though she had moved away from the house. Quickly he raised his eyes in protest from the paper he was pretending to read. "Aunty Brewster, perhaps Mrs. Damon doesn't understand this is just your manner of speaking. What harm will it do to let her pray?"

"Now you keep still, Bobby," commanded Mrs. Brewster. "Much you know about praying. These folks can't come around here acting as if I'm as low as the Irish and giving themselves sanctimonious airs. I won't have a blessed Methodist near me." Then turning to Mrs. Damon, who was somewhat bewildered by the denunciation, the widow remarked: "You needn't bother any more about me

or my soul. You've spoke your piece. If there is any heaven I guess I've got as good a chance to see it as you have."

Mrs. Damon's dignity could not be impaired by ridicule. She rose from her knees with composure. Whatever she uttered was transfigured by the sweetness of her voice, by the faith in her eyes. "I do want to meet you there, sister, to see you walk the golden streets with a crown of stars in your hair."

Mrs. Brewster was moved to sardonic mirth. "What do you want gold streets for? I thought gold was such a terrible sin. I guess Methodists like gold as well as any one, only you're all poor as Job's turkey."

Mrs. Damon moved slowly away to join her daughter who walked on ahead, dreaming her way through worlds far from the ken of Freedom.

"Don't I have a siege with folks who won't mind their own p's and q's?" Mrs. Brewster asked of Orme. "Them Methodists are all crazy."

"I dare say that is exactly what Thessaly, Greece, Rome said of Paul."

Carter at this moment appeared carrying Orme's valise and, carefully wrapped in paper, the Wesley portrait. After the negro had gone and Mrs. Brewster busied herself at the loom which occupied a large space in the sitting-room, Orme still sat at the table drinking coffee. It steadied his nerves and was an excellent substitute for whiskey. His mind reverted to the wife and daughter of Elder Damon. How

pleased they would be with the portrait of Wesley. To no one would it mean more—and he had planned to sell it! Life had been too easy for Robert—with wealth and honor as an inheritance. Bankrupt as he was, in the joy of doing something for Mrs. Damon and Esther, he forgot that he was giving away his future. He rose to go to the parsonage.

"Well, Bobby, are you dead set on kiting off to the ends of the earth?"

"After I take this picture over to Mrs. Damon."

"What! You ain't a-going into that crazy woman's house?" Mrs. Brewster raised her spectacles and allowed them to rest on her forehead, as she always did when astounded.

"Why not? They've been very good to me."

"Good! Making a nuisance of themselves! They'll think you want to jine the Methodist church."

But Orme was already out of the door, package under his arm, making his way toward the corner, mind-drunk with a new idea. He did not hear.

CHAPTER VI

Elder Hezekiah Damon lived in a humble little dwelling by the Methodist church. When erected, both the parsonage and the spireless house of worship were white; but the paint, peeling, left them a weather-worn drab. In the small garden through which Orme passed, no flowers bloomed; the grass was unmown. In those primitive days of bottomless hell any striving toward material beauty on the part of a Methodist minister might have occasioned suspicion that he, in his heart at least, accepted the values of the worldly Baptists and Congregationalists, or even of those idolaters, the Roman Catholics.

There was a silence after Orme rapped for admittance to the parsonage. He looked round. Perhaps Mrs. Damon had not yet returned. No, there was a stir within. Esther Damon opened the door. They stood staring at each other for a long second. In that stare it came over him how dreadful a person she thought him. He broke the spell of confusion by asking, "May I see Mrs. Damon?"

"Mother has gone to pray for the Catholic priest," Esther explained in a silky contralto voice. Father O'Darrell was a friend of Robert's. He smiled as he thought of Mrs. Damon struggling with the priest. After a pause the girl went on, "Won't you come in?

I don't think mother will be gone long. Father O'Darrell always gets so cross when she tries to convert him. He thinks he's saved already," she said as she gave Orme a chair. "He doesn't know any better, poor man! Just think, he smokes cigars."

Robert was one of those meditative persons who see nothing or everything. To-day he noticed everything: the rag carpet; the cane-seated chairs; the gray paper shades at the windows; the centre table holding the law-givers of the family—a large Bible and a coverless, bethumbed edition of Paradise Lost. An engraving of George Washington and family was the only profane decoration on the walls, hung with tablets of prayers, a leaf of which was turned back daily. What a strange, grim setting, he thought, for this girl with the glowing hair, and the intense, pale face. She made him think of purple, cloth of gold, emeralds, and diadems. Seeing her was like finding a great surprise of nature. He was glad Mrs. Damon was absent. He wished to hear Esther talk.

"And you didn't go with Mrs. Damon to help convert Father O'Darrell?"

"No, mother said I was too bad."

"Bad?" He wondered what her definition of badness might be. "Not very bad, I fancy?"

"Terribly!" she said, shaking her head gravely. "Lucy Yates—you know her, don't you?"

"Our fathers were like brothers."

"Lucy and I have always been seat-mates at school. She has such a good time and goes every-

where. Yesterday she took me to see 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' without mother's knowing. It was played in a tent near the school-house."

"Did you find it interesting?"

All her repose was gone. Robert had never seen a face so responsive to the vibrations of thought. She clasped her hands as she leaned forward: "It was heavenly. Where do such beautiful people come from?" How inexperienced she was, he thought, when she could idealize those tawdry, wandering players. "But," she added, "it was so wicked."

"Why wicked?"

"It was *almost* a theatre, and theatres are sin," she answered.

"Are they?"

"Don't you know it either? Of course you don't."

Determined to anticipate her thought, he replied, "No, I'm the worst man in Freedom."

"Mother says you're not so bad as the Clancys or Father O'Darrell. The Clancys sell whiskey and Father O'Darrell worships idols."

"That's something, at least," he said with a smile.

"I shouldn't say anything about other people being wicked because I don't see anything wrong in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.' I told mother so just now. She won't let me see Lucy for a week . . . I must stay in my room all that time."

"Why didn't you ask your mother's permission to go?"

"What was the use?" she answered wistfully. "She'd never let me go; but I'm glad I went. I'd

starve for weeks to see 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' over again. I never was so happy in my life."

"And such innocent happiness."

Esther shook her head. "Mother doesn't call it innocent. I know I must be terrible. I hate it up in my room. It's so dark and dreary. I came down just to see who was at the door. It's like seeing the stage come in or opening a package to see what is in it." She glanced at the Wesley portrait he had laid down.

While removing the paper from the picture, Orme watched Esther's face. He wondered what future was coming to this enkindling girl. Loving her would make a saint or a devil, a poet or a beast out of some man, according to the original warp of his fibre. "I'm going away from Freedom," he said, as he held the portrait before her. "I brought this picture for your mother. I hope she will accept it."

Esther looked at the canvas in silence. Finally she said, "Oh, it's Wesley!" The corners of her mouth drooped. "The frame is very nice." Her tongue did not readily respond to conventional hypocrisy, but she finally added, "Mother will be pleased."

Her disappointment revealed to Orme the truth; he had brought the picture not for the mother, but for the daughter. Esther had seen him at his worst. He wished her to see him at his best. "Don't you like the portrait?" he inquired, the pleasure of giving gone.

"I hoped it was something beautiful," she explained reluctantly. "I saw a corner of the frame." Then, in a gust of passionate thought she burst out, "I can't stand the sight or name of John Wesley—" She broke off in alarm, and covered her lips with her fingers. Soon she went on: "I never said it to any one but Lucy Yates before. She promised not to tell. I suppose I oughtn't to say it to you, but Wesley keeps me away from 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' and everything I like. Father's always preaching about him, but I believe he was hateful. I read in a book at Dr. Yates' that Wesley couldn't even live with his wife."

How Esther Damon could judge! Wesley's weakness came to Orme as his own indictment. Neither he nor she in their earnest interest in what she was saying realized that Mrs. Damon, standing in the open doorway, had heard Esther's words.

"Daughter, why are you down here? Go upstairs to your room," came the mother's low and insistent voice.

Revolt flared in Esther's eyes; Mrs. Damon quelled it with a word, "Daughter, dear!"

The girl went toward the narrow stairway and closed the door with a bang that shook the house. With every step as she mounted the uncarpeted stairs, she seemed to grind to powder Wesley's bones. Mrs. Damon looked at Orme in alarm. For the first time she realized that a new full-grown individual was in her home, one who could form her own opinion and rebel. She promptly met the situation

by going to the door: "Esther, come downstairs immediately."

"Yes, mother." The girl returned meek as a saint.

"You astonish me, daughter. Say you're sorry, and apologize to Mr. Orme for your unladylike behavior."

If Esther had a capacity for wounding, she could beautifully atone. Placing her arm affectionately round Mrs. Damon's neck she pleaded, "Mother, dear, forgive me. I don't know why I'm so bad." When Mrs. Damon kissed her, the girl turned to Robert, "I'm sorry, Mr. Orme."

"That is nothing," he said. "I like people as much for their imperfections as for their perfections . . . sometimes more. But I hope you won't misjudge Wesley. He was a great man because he protested at a time when protesting was hard. He lived and suffered for an ideal!"

A wonderful light came into Esther's eyes. "It must be splendid to live and suffer for an ideal," she answered. Then she tiptoed softly upstairs.

"My daughter isn't usually disobedient, Mr. Orme," was Mrs. Damon's apology. "When she was a child she did some strange things. One day when she was seven she disappeared. Night came and we thought she was dead. At twelve o'clock we found her at the lake, asleep. She told us she had started to find the world's end. Now she is grown I'm afraid some of her pleasure-loving friends suggest adventures to Esther. Yesterday Lucy Yates

took her to see 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.' I don't like to break off the girls' friendship, but Esther must be obedient. I'm keeping her in her room for a week."

"You're not afraid to punish a girl like your daughter so severely?"

Mrs. Damon looked at Orme blankly: "Afraid of what?"

"A reaction. Nature, you know——"

"Nature!" Mrs. Damon smiled in pity. "God is nature. How can I be afraid so long as God has her in His care?" Her eyes fell upon the portrait of Wesley. She bent over it, scanning each feature with love. Raising her head, she smiled in ecstasy. "Isn't it beautiful? You brought it for me to see once more?"

"Yes, I'm going away from Freedom for an indefinite stay——"

"And you'd like me to take care of the picture," she interrupted eagerly.

"I'd like to give you the portrait as a memento of your kindness to me."

Tears stood in Mrs. Damon's eyes. Trembling, she seized his hand and said, "How can you doubt our Heavenly Father, Mr. Orme, when he inspires you to such kindness? How wonderful that I should have this blessing." Again she bent over the canvas. "Where shall I hang it?" She hurriedly opened the door leading into the parlor and Orme followed her into the room.

Robert was surprised by an unexpected note of worldliness in the apartment. The mahogany fur-

niture was of a solid, pleasing mould. It had been inherited by Mrs. Damon from her mother, but she still questioned her right to its possession. Concerning this self-indulgence she passed many hours in communion with her Maker. Was not this a covert concession to godlessness?

"I'll place Wesley's portrait there," she said, indicating a side of the room where hung a cardboard motto, "God Bless Our Home," worked in crewels. "My husband will be so happy. He is preaching in Attica to-day." Then she turned to Robert and questioned, "Perhaps I oughtn't to take the picture, Mr. Orme? Are you quite sure you will not keep it?"

"It belongs here. I shall like to think it has found its place at last." As he spoke, he noticed several oblong pieces of cardboard on the marble-top table. Taking one up, he asked, "What are these?"

"Some of my child's work." And such work—odd bits of bright paper skilfully glued to cardboard gave the effect of weird, tropical landscape painted by one with a sense of color, but without sense of form.

"They're beautiful," Orme said, holding them at a distance. "How much they suggest. What imagination!"

"Her father and I thought them rather odd and pretty, and so I kept them. Esther can do anything with her hands. We're very poor. I've nothing else to offer you. If you care for such a trifle I'd like you to take one of those pictures."

Never had a gift so pleased Orme. He chose a picture and placed it in his pocket as if it were a masterpiece. Presently he took leave of Mrs. Damon. Once out of the front door he raised his eyes to the upper story. Like a beautiful young captive, leaning against the small-paned window, there stood Esther Damon. When she saw him she tapped on the glass and gesticulated furiously. He made out that he should look downward. At his feet fluttered a piece of paper which read:

Will you please say to Lucy I told mother about "Uncle Tom's Cabin," and that I mayn't see her for a week? Ask Lucy to pass here every day, and she'll find a note on the grass in front of the house. Tell her I adore her always. Thank you.

ESTHER DAMON.

P. S. I don't think you are very wicked.—E. D.

Orme read and re-read the note. He studied the eager, reckless handwriting. Poor girl, locked up in that garret. Of course he would take the message to Lucy. He read the postscript aloud. What pleasure there was in helping others, he thought. Then his intellectual honesty caused him to stop short. How sweet it was to serve Esther Damon! In wild confused yearning he longed for youth, decency, and liberty; but this longing was a new abyss in himself. "Good God," he said, "I'm glad I'm going. I'm a new kind of fool."

BOOK TWO

ESTHER DAMON

Strange the world about mé lies,
Never yet familiar grown,
Still disturbs me with surprise,
Haunts me like a face half known.

In this world of starry dome,
Floored with gem-like plains and seas,
Shall I never feel at home,
Never wholly be at ease?

On from room to room I stray,
Yet my host can ne'er espy,
And I know not to this day
Whether guest or captive I.

So between the starry dome,
And the floor of plains and seas,
I have never felt at home,
Never wholly felt at ease.—WILLIAM WATSON.

CHAPTER VII

THE forum of Freedom was the Four Corners. Here the opinions of Horace Greeley were read aloud and discussed. Here the reputations of the local clergy were established or overthrown. Here international questions were solved. Ira Wherritt, Ebenezer Hood, and Job Spear, the merchant princes of Freedom, were also its philosophers. They dominated the village, politically, financially, and theologically. The philosophers were confounded by the disappearance of Robert Orme. Twelve months had passed since they saw him go away in the stage-coach to Ripon. Since that time, the very day, they recalled, Enoch Hood's horse died of the colic, no word had come from him. That his absence still remained a mystery discredited the Four Corners as the source of absolute knowledge. Who in the future would accept their opinion on the weather, the crops, the president, and God? They plunged about desperately and again questioned the stage driver, who seemed closest to the solution of the mystery.

For the hundredth time he repeated his story. He had driven the passenger to Ripon where Orme purchased a ticket, the railway agent said, for New York. From that moment speculation wandered

and lost itself in uncertainty; but the philosophers of the Four Corners couldn't afford uncertainty. Besides, the bankruptcy and separation of the Ormes had given them a taste for the sensational. They supplied a melodramatic climax to the missing man's life; Robert Orme had drunk himself to death and his body would be found in the East River.

No one doubted this inspired information. Alice questioned whether she should wear mourning for such a husband. Her old aunt said that in her time the dead were respected. Alice's more modern school friends reminded her that black is unbecoming and the wearing of it a waste of time. They wondered whom she would marry for a second husband. She bought several new dresses in Buffalo. All thought it best that Robert had died in New York instead of living further to disgrace his family in Freedom. The Methodist church offered prayers for him, and several grateful villagers recounted his acts of kindness.

After Freedom had solemnly buried Robert the widow Brewster one morning appeared in the post-office. The pale, tenor-voiced clerk gave her the mail, with this astonishing information, "Your postal card is from Bob Orme."

Mrs. Brewster's joy overflowed into a cackling laugh. "I told 'em so," she said, looking at the card with the wonder of an inhabitant of Mars. Holding it close to her eyes, she read, "New York City!" "Dear me suz! It's the first time I ever had a postal card from New York City. See," she said to the clerk, indicating the post-mark, "it's printed

right in front—New York. . . . Why, they've left off the city, but," she questioned a little anxiously, "it means New York City, don't it?" Being assured of the correctness of her surmise, she read aloud that all loiterers in the drug-store might hear: "Shall be home Tuesday evening, Robert Orme." "Coming home!" she went on to the clerk. "Ain't he a nice boy to write me? He sent me postal cards from Washington and Philadelphia when he went to the war."

Mrs. Brewster's abrupt resurrection of Robert Orme was followed by the sudden, smiling consciousness that her cooking and weaving no longer pressed and that it was vastly important she should buy at Wherritt's a pound of tea she did not need. When she exhibited the post-card to the storekeeper the old man changed his spectacles to read the message. "Waal," he declared in astonishment, "I thought it was good riddance to bad rubbish. Who'd ever suppose he'd come back to face Freedom? I guess he's got the cheek if he don't get drunk and fall off the cars."

There was more than usual of Freedom to face this evening when the stage-coach, making an ineffectual effort to dash like a Roman chariot up to "Hood's Merchandise Store. Established in 1820," as the sign testified, at last gave up and candidly lumbered its way into the Four Corners. For the second time in the day many irreproachable females had left their sewing and crocheting to appear in the commercial centre. This sort of indiscretion

was perilous to reputation. But here, with the frivolous, gad-about creatures of the village, they were assembled to witness the arrival of the public conveyance from Ripon.

The stage disgorged two occupants. The first to alight was an over-fed travelling salesman who, luggage in hand, unmindful that there was anything unusual in the evening event, promptly waddled to the Ivy Green. Orme did not linger. He gave Freedom a surprise. There was no stumbling from the dusty vehicle. He gained the ground with sure, firm step. Clear-eyed, skin bronzed and firm, he walked up the main street toward the Wherritt home with something of his old glowing joy in his strength. The townspeople to whom he nodded thought it strange he did not appear like a beggar.

Job Spear stopped counting eggs and said to the clerk, "Got a new suit of clothes, ain't he?"

"Looks so. Wonder where so much money comes from?"

The answer was poisoned with suspicion. "Money in New York must drop off trees as apples do in Freedom."

During their separation of a year Orme had re-idealized Alice. Now he hastened to her like a young lover. He would tell her of his new hopes, his new plans, the new clean life he had to offer her. He hoped she would sympathize with his struggles, share his joy in self-mastery. At a distance he could see her in a white muslin gown, sitting on the formal Wherritt porch. The sight of

her touched him tenderly. There should be no more bitter years in their lives.

With determined mien he passed through the gate and approached the house. Alice was more charming than when he had left Freedom. She had the loveliness of the woman who desires to attract. But it was not possible to him to understand from her falling countenance, as her eyes met his, that the restored grace was not for him. Nor could he know that she had expected never to see him again. Something there was in her appearance, something he could not analyze, that pained and disconcerted him, something that made the few steps between them difficult to traverse. He hoped his presence would not bring back to her their unhappy years. Perturbed as he was, he felt little surprise when she addressed him as if he were an intrusive peddler. "Oh, you've come back."

"Yes," he answered, "I'm here." He laid his hand upon the valise which rested on the steps. In endeavoring to make the simplest statement to his wife, he trembled before her judgment to a degree that made him realize the exorbitant cost of the past decade. "There are many things we must say to each other, Alice. Mayn't we go into the house?"

Her answer took on the character of an appeal to Freedom as a protecting witness: "We can say all we have to say out here."

"Very well," he said, still standing. "I don't blame you, Alice, for being angry with me for com-

ing here that last horrible day. It was inexcusable. . . . I think I must have been mad. . . . I hope you won't find it too hard to forgive me."

"There is nothing to apologize for," she answered with weary cynicism. "What you did was not unusual for you."

"I never behaved quite so badly before, but forgive me for that and all my life—the humiliations and griefs I caused you."

"Oh, I forgive you," she answered perfunctorily.

"Don't be impatient with me," he pleaded.

"Impatient! Do you think I'm a woman or an angel, Robert? I'm just a woman, and I've heard the same thing every two months for I don't know how many years."

"You've heard the words, Alice—never the spirit of them. The words are threadbare, I realize, but I don't know any others. Perhaps I've forfeited all right to consideration, but if you only knew what I have gone through you'd understand I mean what I ask. I'll tell you if you care to hear. Each day was a struggle, but I won every time. I said I wouldn't come back till I proved you might believe in me. You may. When I went away I got off the train near Albany and went out into the fields and sweated the poison out of me. In the city I worked as a carpenter and cabinet maker. I learned so much, Alice. I had looked all my life for philosophy to save me. I didn't know it was work I needed. Now I don't want whiskey. I've found a real religion, work. And I'm going to build you a

house. Come over to Aunty Brewster's and live till it's finished."

Her interest slowly revived. "Is that house another of your dreams?"

"No, it's reality, Alice. I've made some money and in building I'm going back to first principles. The first settlers in Freedom hewed their houses out of the forest. It was splendid. I'll do the same." He glowed as he promised. "We'll have a log house on that lot across from the old place. There'll be three or four nice rooms, one with a big fireplace. And I'll do it all myself. We'll imagine we're pioneers."

Her interest was now extinct. "I was always glad, Robert, I wasn't a pioneer. I like things finished."

But his enthusiasm expanded into words which even her manner failed to check: "Ours won't be an ordinary log house, Alice. It will be beautiful—finished in chestnut. We'll build it under the apple and cherry trees. I'll have a workshop and make furniture. I believe there'll be a market for it in the city. I can make money in that way. Then I'll open a select school to prepare the academy pupils for college."

"I'm not romantic, Robert," she answered judicially. "Romance doesn't give a good fixed income. I don't see anything very beautiful in living in a log house with a man who coolly tells me his ambition is to be a carpenter."

Her cold implacable perception of the prosaic side

in the plan which meant so much to him routed his self-command, and he said, "For God's sake, Alice, stop thinking about what kind of a house you're to live in. Consider a little that we'll be together. Did you marry me or the house on the hill?"

He waited for her answer. Without hesitation it came: "I didn't marry you at all. You're a peevish, ill-tempered drunkard. I should never have married a man with hair gray from drink. I haven't a white hair in my head. I married a handsome young officer."

"Yes," he answered with a sigh. "I suppose I'm the only person in Freedom who has grown old in ten years."

"You can slur me all you want," she responded in martyred tones. "I can bear it. I'm used to it. I expect it. But I don't intend to leave pa's comfortable home. I'm sure of bread and butter here."

"Is there nothing," he asked impatiently, "greater than three meals a day? It seems to me better to try to make the unhappy a little less sad. I've never been able to do it, but I will. If I can ever do for any one what I ask of you, I'll be satisfied. All on earth I want, Alice dear, is faith, not much—a little. Don't stint me. Be more generous than I deserve. Don't be another of my critics. I have enough of them. If only every morning—whether it's true or not—you'll tell me you have faith in me, I'll ask no more." Needing her assistance, he seemed to need everything. "I know you have few faults to

make you indulgent to others. Perhaps I am pitiably weak to urge my request, but—I need you."

"What is the use of trying to pretend, Robert?" she said like an unawakened child with little comprehension of how deep the words cut. "I have no faith in you."

Now it seemed he had not advanced a step toward the light since that terrible day of blackness, when, alone, he tramped the dusty highway from Freedom to the lake and return. All his future whirled before him as a dreary, dusty road which in solitude with the sun beating on his aching head he must travel. Robert looked at his wife's shallow, pretty gray eyes, and though he shrank from affixing labels or giving judgments, he read in her bloodless fairness a poverty of faith, of love. "Very well, Alice," he said slowly. "I'll not be more abject. You shouldn't desire it. I'll not ask you again. I think I understand." With abrupt transition he drew from his pocket a leather case containing bills of a large denomination. "Here is half of what I earned last year," he said carelessly.

Then he saw what would bring the light into her eyes, what would restore the girlish color to her cheeks. "Oh, thank you, Robert," she said, counting the money before she inquired, "and have you the rest?"

His astonishment increased as he answered, "Of course. Why?"

"Don't you think that you'd better give it all to me? You know I manage ever so much better than

you. You'll never build a house. You'll only drink it all up at Clancy's."

For the first time Orme entirely realized that he had married Ira Wherritt's daughter. He smiled. But his smile twisted into a queer grimace, as, ignoring her doubt, he insisted. "I think I'm entitled to half for the house I shall build, Alice. When it's finished there will always be room in the house—in the house, understand—for you."

He took up his valise preparatory to departure. Alice opened her lips to speak. He gathered that now she would have reversed her former decision; but he desired his supreme tribunal to be unbribed. He saw that his wife was shut off from him by the barrier of her nature. Neither knew when one took leave of the other. On his way to the gate he met his father-in-law who was coming from the store. No salutation passed between the two men.

Orme had intended to go directly to Mrs. Brewster's house; but from the excitement of disappointment in his interview with Alice suddenly was born in him a devouring thirst, a furious need of reinforcement of strength, a need he thought uprooted and replaced by his new faith, work. On the instant the drug-store, not the boarding-house, became his objective point. While his new will asserted its restraint, his old will hurried him on his way. He wrestled with something stronger than himself, of treble his strength. Burdened with apprehension he entered the drug-store, and like one bent on suicide, purchased a bottle of brandy. He placed it in his

pocket as though intending to use it for medicine. And so indifferently do we bear the tragedies of others that the druggist winked at the clerk.

Two figures were seated on the Wherritt veranda when Orme, in passing, heard his father-in-law drawl, "I don't know, Alice, as you had ought to have took that money." Robert could hear Wherritt pause to expectorate tobacco-juice. "You'll find out he never come by it honestly. Maybe he stole it."

Until Robert heard the sneering words he had withstood the brandy. Now, to the devil with resistance! He wanted to be drunk every day of his life. What a fool he had been to think of namby-pamby repentance. Why not be a man? He emptied the flask. The demon of rage and whiskey was in him. He longed to murder his father-in-law who had taken Alice away. Picking up a stone that lay in the road, Robert heaved it at the Wherritt house. With joy he heard the crashing glass. He hoped he had killed Ira Wherritt. He hadn't. He had broken a window. The typhoon of wrath in his brain calmed suddenly. He was steadied by his violent act. He had no more desire for whiskey.

Mrs. Brewster had been weaving by the dim firelight. Seeing Robert at the door she left her work. "Why, Bobby, to think you've come all the way from New York City to-day." She frankly inspected his hat, coat, and boots. "You do look tony, as if you'd bought out all New York. Was it nice riding on the cars? What am I talking about? Of course you want supper. Folks never

get anything to eat in New York. They all starve to death in cities." She saw the despair in his face, the deep chiselled lines about his mouth. "Why, what's the matter, Bobby?" she asked, her gruff voice suddenly betraying a maternal cadence.

"Man hasn't the contempt for a dog that he has for another who has failed," he burst forth. "But tell me, Aunty Brewster, I may count on you, mayn't I? You are my friend, you believe in me."

Mrs. Brewster no longer saw the seamed cheeks, the graying hair, the sad eyes. He was merely a cajoling, brown-eyed boy pleading with her to make him a little pie, or to give him three portions of ice-cream. She was not entirely certain that she believed in his will, but she did believe in his heart. Placing her hand on his head as she had not done since he was a child, she answered. "Why, of course I do, Bobby. You bet I do." He sank into a chair by her loom, and she questioned him no further. But once she paused in her work and shook a fist of anathema in the direction of the Wherritt house. "Oh, these women! these women! I'm ashamed I'm a woman."

CHAPTER VIII

One of the fairest recollections of Robert Orme's childhood was his father's talent for recounting tales of adventure. There came a day, however, in Robert's early boyhood, when Squire Orme was no longer called upon to exercise his fancy for his son's amusement. The lad told his parent he could dream more beautiful stories himself. Indeed, his untrammelled, boyish imagination led him into battlefields thick with danger, to the tops of the highest mountains, across the roughest seas. It gave him the companionship of the bravest men, the love of the most beautiful women.

Orme's first opportunity to satisfy his yearning for the extraordinary, came when at the beginning of the Civil War, a call was made for volunteers. Immediately he and his brothers offered their services, and urged other men in the community to accompany them. After four years of fighting, Robert, returning to the village, found the pursuits of peace flat. This hamlet of Freedom where life was bounded by ignorance, intolerance, and the narrowest orthodoxy, was entirely without wide, exhilarating reaches of thought or action. He secluded himself from the place, excluded it from his doors; but he flung them open wide to his master—whiskey.

Now he was deprived of the fortune raised by him as a drawbridge over the moat of inequality between him and the villagers; and fate pitched him against his will into the life of Freedom.

After his return from New York, Robert lived at Mrs. Brewster's boarding-house. There he felt more keenly than ever the narrowness and dulness of the town. He was tempted to leave and never come back. For days he fought out with himself the question of his future. Suddenly he felt the good of the world. Surely there was something to be got out of these commonplace days. There must be splendid duties in every obscure life. Perhaps there were great possibilities in this village. It was like a new dawn when he recognized his own duty. Instead of seeking elsewhere for the unusual, the heroic, it would be better, braver to try to find it here. He was as far from perfection as Freedom. He wondered if each could not help the other to create a more decent human society. Robert saw a life work before him. The path he was to follow was so straight as to bestir his wonder that he had not sooner discovered it.

When he should finish the log-cabin planned by him he would go on working as a carpenter and cabinet-maker. Even in the days of his prosperity he had delighted in reproducing mediæval furniture. One year's toil with his hands had perfected his skill to such a degree that he now saw a livelihood in manufacturing furniture. If that failed he would be a carpenter. Within a fortnight after his home-

coming Robert put on a blue shirt and overalls. The Four Corners stared at him as much sober as drunk. But he was happy because he had abandoned a false standard of living. He was no longer a gentleman according to the traditions of his family. He was a man.

Building was not easy in Freedom. A house was seldom erected; so there were few carpenters. The morning when the ground was to be broken for Orme's log house, Tom Tribble, a clean faced, bright-eyed, young workman arrived before the stone-masons and laborers. Robert noticed that Mearns was absent. Orme found him about to enter Clancy's. Mearns was drafted into immediate, but reluctant service.

"No, I won't work on the same house with Tom Tribble," Mearns protested. "He carried the flag Decoration Day, and he didn't know how."

Orme silenced him. "Excuses, Mearns! Come with me and next year I'll see that you carry the flag."

There was great activity on the Orme hill. Men unloaded building materials from heavy wagons. The cabin was to face the setting sun and the sweet, beguiling little lake, with its unreal blue. Robert's fancy was that the house should sprawl into left and right wings, forming a court before an old apple-tree.

When Orme broke the earth, he felt he was enfranchised into the true work of the world. At last he touched the heart of life. But as the day

wore on he was troubled by his altered attitude toward the men he employed. When he gave work to others, during his period of inherited prosperity, he felt like a philanthropist. One year as a laborer had wrought a change. He recalled that his employers in Albany always took from him more than they gave. Now, though he was paying the usual wage, his conscience pricked him. He was not giving his helpers what they earned for him. He threw down the spade and fetched them some water from the spring. Still he was not satisfied with the relations between him and his men. He was robbing them. Perhaps he ought to apologize to them for being their master. But he had a great charm of being—the laborers liked to work for him, and his thoughts were soon for the task.

Often on this first morning Robert looked across at the family residence hiding among the trees. He believed it had never possessed the meaning for his kinsmen that even this foundation of a cabin bore for him. The four generations of Ormes living in the old home had not known the discipline of manual labor. The pompous brick house stirred in him slight regret. Had he not been dispossessed of his property he would never have learned that the only way to understand life was by work; the only way to love life was by work. Even the philosophies which once lay so near him were chill when compared with the ecstasy of doing.

At noon the men seated themselves on the rocks to eat their dinner. Orme went to Mrs. Brewster's

house, but he felt he should have remained with his workmen. At sight of him the widow exclaimed, "Why, Bobby, your face is as red as the flag." She pointed to the national colors which she, a lineal descendant of a soldier of the American Revolution, kept flying from her roof. In her queer fancy the presence of the flag in that spot indicated that she was a branch of the Federal Government. "I can see you don't have to have work fanned into your hands. You've been going at it like fun. I was born in a log house, and it will be kind of good to see one again. You don't look like one of them flippy-floppy city fops, now, Bobby. Mr. Brewster was a carpenter; I wish he was alive; but he broke his leg before you was born." Mrs. Brewster always spoke of her husband's broken leg as an epic heroism. It really came from slipping on his wife's over-polished kitchen floor.

Orme, seated at Mrs. Brewster's table, was no longer the gray, trembling wreck of the previous year. His body, hardened by twelve months of manual labor, was holding out beautifully. His new vision of life forbade his resting while his men were uncomfortable. After a light meal, in spite of the protests of Mrs. Brewster, he hurried back up the hill, carrying a pot of coffee. She called after him he would make himself sick. He was only pretending to be grown. He wasn't. He never would be. When he wanted anything he would move heaven and earth to get it. Then he would play with it day and night until he was tired of it.

The first day the men worked till twilight. This cabin seemed to belong to them. They wished to see how soon it would be ready. When Robert considered their hours of toil, he said to himself, "I'm a robber. I don't waylay strangers. I waylay workmen."

The following day, in order to compensate the builders, he gave them leave to cease work early in the afternoon; but his personality had a spell. They did not go to their homes. Sprawled on the grass, they fell to watching the movements of a hill of ants. Observing the interest of the men, Robert, who was pre-eminently a teacher, told them quite simply the story of the ants, their laws, their government, their battles. In response to their questions he talked an hour. When Orme finished, Mearns, who had listened with wide eyes and relaxed lips, asked, "Do you know any more, Captain?" It was the pathetic plea of a child for fairy tales.

"Yes, Captain, do you know any more?" Tribble inquired.

Robert knew, indeed, many more romances of nature, of the birds, their habits, their flights; of the light-of-love butterflies; of everything they saw about them. As he talked with the men, answering their simple questions, he seemed to give them eyes for seeing the beauty of the landscape, ears for hearing the hidden harmonies of nature. For the first time the toilers found life to be more than the dull routine of poverty. Labor was no longer a disease; it was an ideal. And a change came over

him as well that afternoon, something which freshened, strengthened his existence. When he found himself hearing for his fellow-workers, seeing for them, thinking for them, his own enlightenment began. If only he could teach them to hear and see for themselves.

Each afternoon as the season advanced, Orme spent an hour talking with them. Sometimes Carter sat near by, rolling his eyes in wonder, and shaking his head over the surprises in the unfamiliar alphabet of the ways of nature. Already at their homes in the evening some of the men were groping through primers of science, delighting in their discoveries. After Orme voluntarily reduced their working hours to six, the men at the close of the day were like ambitious children in their haste once more to enter into the relation of teacher and pupil. Their affection for Robert, their belief in him, their faith that he could continue to instruct and lead them, was to him unfailing sustenance. As he worked with them, he reflected that they were building more than a log house. They were building him. They were building one another.

Three months of work in the sun. Three months of sound sleep. Best of all, three months of trying to help his workmen in their development. Orme's eyes glowed with the brilliancy of boyhood. His dark skin was ruddy and clear. Save for the deep lines at the sides of his mouth and the inexpressible sadness of his face when in repose, one would have believed that nature had forgotten and he had re-

gained uncorrupted youth. Yet when he felt most secure he found an abyss at his feet.

One morning, when Mearns did not come to work Robert discovered him staggering out of Clancy's. At sight of this flesh and blood ghost of his own past, Orme's heart went terror-sick. Should he himself ever stumble over that precipice? Ah, he would rather die than sink again like poor Mearns! Others might smile at the sight of the helpless drunkard, but Orme led the weakling home, listened to his excuses, and sat with him all night, imagining the horror of a similar plight for himself. Instructed by fear and sorrow, the next day Robert escorted the penitent Mearns back to work.

The apples were falling, dropping into the open windows of the quaint double-winged cabin, when the work-shop was finished. So zealous had been Orme's effort to be really kind to his employees that the final hours of labor were for the workmen like the closing of a romance. Where should they ever find another Robert Orme? Yet he was not satisfied. Looking at the house and the work-shop into which the men had put so much of themselves, he believed he should share the home with them. But this appeared impossible. As Robert talked to the men the last time, some vital thing seemed about to leave him. How much he needed them! When Mearns, speaking for the others, asked if they might come evenings to him for lessons, Robert felt he had been saved from a great peril.

Orme did not meet Alice during the summer. She kept to the Wherritt side of the street; he to Aunty Brewster's. But with obstinate idealism he always felt he was preparing a home for her. If only she could see his beautiful cabin. Dr. Yates and Father O'Darrell had both called and admired his work. Alice would surely like it, he reasoned. Any one could buy a handsome house; but this house he had built. He had proved himself. Measuring his wife by his own overbelief he hoped she would like the home because his brain had conceived it, because his hands had helped in the construction.

The south wing with its view of the sweet stretch of valley, hills, and lakes, Robert had reserved for her. He decided to place there the conventional mahogany furniture stored in Mrs. Brewster's barn. Thus he would spare Alice the sight of his heavy, massive things, ridiculed by her and the village, in the living-room and the north wing he occupied.

Orme and Carter drove in a hired lumber wagon to fetch the furniture.

"Waal, is your house in apple-pie order?" asked Mrs. Brewster, fastening her sleeve, as Orme appeared at her gate. "Are you going to have a housewarming?"

"I'm afraid no one would come to my party, but I hope you will have dinner with us to-morrow. Carter and I came down to get some of the furniture in the barn."

Mrs. Brewster rubbed her chin. "What be you talking about?"

"The furniture I stored in your barn a year ago."

"I'll be switched! Sit down there." Mrs. Brewster indicated a green chair behind the morning-glory vines. "Didn't you know the furniture was all sold to a second-hand man in Buffalo?"

"The bank had no right to it."

"The bank didn't do it. Your wife sold it a month after you went away."

"Alice!"

"Folks in cities are crazy about mahogany. She got top-notch prices. They took the books and all to get the mahogany."

"Not my books?" he stammered. This was the conclusive blow that demolished the last bit of sentiment lingering in him for Alice.

"Yes, she's just like her father. They don't come it over her. She made a first-rate bargain."

Robert caught only the last words. Bargain! Bargain! Of course she did! Ira Wherritt was rich and Alice bargained his books away! Anger burned in his blood. Greed! Greed! How he hated it! How he hated her! She had taken his books. She had sold his dearest friends. He could have strangled the greed out of her. His books! How dared a barbarian like her touch his books? What did she know about them or care? She had bartered his happiness for a savings-bank account. Now he had no money for more books, and heaven only knew when he should have. "My books," he almost moaned. The future closed against him. What

should he do in the dark, haunted night without his books? How could he live?

Clancy's! How the bottles gleamed like great jewels! How the wine danced and beguiled! How the fumes rose sweet to his nostrils! How the fragrant languorous world reeled! Ah, wine was the friend when all else failed!

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, Bobby," broke in Mrs. Brewster, on his meditation. "I bought a few of your books from the Buffalo auctioneer. I ain't got no use for 'em myself. They only clutter up the parlor." She opened the door leading off the piazza. "But you liked 'em, and they made me kind of think of you. You see they all said you was dead."

In the darkened parlor, seldom opened, Robert saw Mrs. Brewster's what-not filled with his best-beloved volumes. Aunty Brewster had chosen those most worn by use. "You can take 'em up to your house, Bobby. Ketch me reading one of 'em."

His anger, the despair caused by losing the books, the surprise of their discovery when he thought he should never see them again, overcame him. He threw his arms round her and sobbed.

CHAPTER IX

FREEDOM wondered whether Alice Orme would return to Orme. Ira Wherritt, when questioned, became profane on the subject; he said he'd see that scoundrel damned before Alice should go and live with him in a shanty. Would they believe it? Orme tried to murder his wife when he came back from New York. This beautiful ball of scandal was tossed into the Four Corners. Pat Clancy sent it twirling across the street. Job Spear added a generous impetus. When it reached Hood's, half a dozen contributed kicks, landing it at its final goal—Deacon Snead's house. Then the ball was rolled up and down the winter streets, growing like the great snow monsters made by school-boys on Robert Orme's hill.

Aunty Brewster warred against Robert's detractors, called them "copperheads," accused them of sympathy with the assassination of President Lincoln. Doctor Yates never lost an opportunity to deepen in Robert the sense of his confidence in his friend's new will. The physician, enswathed in mufflers and shawls, early in the winter, stopped his "cutter" before Robert's door. He brought his shy, slender son Irving, with his Keats-like face, to Orme for lessons. Irving must be ready for college next year.

The following Sunday Dr. Yates was waylaid by Deacon Snead coming out of the Baptist church.

"Ain't it pretty risky, doctor, to let that Bob Orme teach Irving? Ain't you afraid he'll turn out to be a drunkard or an infidel, or a murderer?"

"Nonsense," laughed Dr. Yates, shaking his fine old head. "I've known Robert ever since he was born. He's a hero."

"They say he was a good soldier," reluctantly conceded the deacon, "but you never can tell. I didn't read anything about it in the *Tribune*."

"War! Murder! That's nothing. Robert is a good soldier now, every day. It's much greater. I hope he teaches that to Irving."

"Do you want Irving to live with tramps?" insisted the deacon as Dr. Yates slipped on the icy sidewalk in his haste to depart.

"I'd like Irving to give up his bed to a sick tramp and sleep on the floor as Robert did the other night. But I'm afraid my boy is too much like me ever to do that."

When Deacon Snead and his wife met over the mid-day meal, he told her he thought Dr. Yates was crazy. He let Irving go to Bob Orme's every day, and the doctor said he wanted his boy to live with tramps. Mrs. Snead answered that Irving Yates would probably be hanged.

Robert learned from Aunty Brewster of the controversy raging about his separation from his wife. He shuddered at the possibility of Alice's return. His marriage was much less marriage than if she

were dead. She hung like a weight round his neck. With all his strength he wished he could cut the tie binding her to him. He tried to forget her in laughter—laughter and work. He sharpened his vigilance, hardened his will with discipline and work. After overcoming his fury for self-abandonment to drink, he was urged into work by an unceasing force. His imagination outran all conceivable human capacity for accomplishment; but he kept on as if he could embody all his dreams in achievement. Now that he saw life and knew it, his enthusiasm carried him onward like an eagle's wing.

He was up early in the morning, shovelling snow away from the path to the gate, cleaning and varnishing furniture in his shop, preparing his first shipment for the market. This was before Irving Yates' lesson hours. In the afternoon he experimented with dyes, improving on what Mrs. Brewster taught him. By lowering and softening the tones of her carpets, he thought they might find sale in the city. She told him his colors weren't colors at all. His yellows weren't yellows. As for red, give her good old-fashioned turkey-red. His blues were all faded out. Yet she followed his suggestions. When later Robert sent to New York a piece of Mrs. Brewster's carpet, with a set of his oak household furniture, she told him she was sure city folks wouldn't want such stuff. But every day she made a point of seeing him and asking for news. None came.

One December afternoon Robert, leaving Mrs.

Brewster's, a few minutes after the bell of the academy ceased ringing, found himself in a throng of young people on their way to coast down his hill and to skate on the lake. A dozen lads outran their school-fellows, eager to reach the fort at Orme's gate he had built with them out of snow. They shouted. They threw snowballs. They washed one another's faces. He was on good terms with the very young, the weak, the helpless, but his life had estranged him from most of the villagers. He was acquainted with few of the older students, and so he loitered behind them.

Lucy Yates helloed to him with her muff as she passed. Lucy, blue-eyed, round-cheeked, downy, dimpled, was the sister of Irving. Light-footed, graceful, fair-haired, she wore a white cap, a pretty gray coat, and a white fur collar. Her right arm encircled the waist of a tall girl enveloped in a large fringed shawl which hung straight and loose from her shoulders to the bottom of the skirt, draping her entire figure with dusky grace. In spite of the dingy black shawl, held together by bare rosy hands, Esther Damon carried her head like a splendid, barbaric chieftainess. As she walked, her slender waist swayed like the stem of a flower. Orme had not seen her in more than a year. He wondered if she would remember him. He almost stopped still as he awaited her recognition. For a second his working clothes served as a disguise. Then she greeted him charmingly. Inherently she knew how to bow. He walked on behind her and Lucy Yates,

and it gladdened him to recall that in Esther Damon's home was the portrait of Wesley. It would always remain there. What if Alice had sold the picture!

Among the students were pranks and sallies and laughter. One youth alone was deprived of comradeship. He fairly glittered in his city apparel as he drew after him a bright red coaster. Orme saw that he glittered and flashed alone. This boy was Harry Clancy, who before and after school hours, kept the bar at the Ivy Green. He was better dressed than the others, and handsome in a dashing, actor-like way; but Orme soon discovered that Clancy was the pariah of the school. Robert had a tenderness for pariahs, being one himself, though in a different category from Clancy. Robert thrust himself on no one. Those who knew him must come every inch of the way. But in the well-clad Clancy, the essence of the tavern and its heart-breaking degradation, Orme observed an effort to bribe his way to village favor.

Irving began the afternoon sport. He took Esther Damon and Lucy Yates on his sled. Harry offered his coaster to several of the girls. By each it was declined. Then he invited some boys. They too found places elsewhere or were going to skate. At last Clancy went down the slope alone. When they all came back, frolicking up the hill, puffing, panting, he was still alone.

There was a second series of invitations. Clancy again made himself a target for village brutality.

Esther Damon watched the scene. In her intent eyes Orme observed an expression of pain—pain she had not herself endured, but which had been transmitted to her by those who sang in flames. Now the meaning in her face which shone, expelled all others, and transformed her, was pity. Ernest Chase, the curly-headed, freckled-nosed son of the druggist, teasingly pulled one of Esther's long auburn braids. "What's the matter, red head?"

He got no further. Harry leaped upon Ernest, dragged him to the side of the road, thrust his head into a snow-bank, commanded, "Take it back! Say you're sorry."

"I'm sorry," came the half-smothered apology.

Orme was no longer interested in the battle of Bunker Hill at his gate. He watched the juvenile tournament of chivalry. Esther's hands were clasped. Her eyes followed Clancy. The defender came back for his reward. It was these words, "May I ride with you, Harry?"

"I'd like mighty well to have you, if you would," he answered.

Orme sickened as he saw Esther take a seat on Clancy's sled. "My goodness! What would Esther's father say?" Ernest Chase asked.

Ella Cowley's question was even more confounding. "What would Esther's mother say?"

Orme wondered, what indeed, if that saint-faced woman had seen her daughter. Yet he fancied somewhere the girl had learned to be strong. Her conduct would often contradict her upbringing.

Mrs. Damon, he believed, could no longer keep Esther in a garret. He turned away from the sight of what he thought was Esther Damon and Harry Clancy coasting down the hill, the girl's red braids waving rebelliously in the breeze. In reality, he turned his back on a miracle, but no one knew it.

The miracle began this way. Esther looked at Harry. Harry looked at Esther. They smiled. They were close together. The December wind blew on their faces. Their throats swelled. Their hearts beat fast.

"You're the nicest girl in town," he said.

"Oh, Harry!"

"And the prettiest."

"I, pretty?" The thought made her drunk. "Why . . . I'm awfully ugly. . . . I have red hair."

"I like red hair best of all. Yours is beautiful. Your eyes are so dark."

It was the first compliment she had ever received, she who had hungered all her life for beauty, who loved Lucy Yates because she thought Lucy beautiful. Esther was no longer Esther. Harry was no longer Harry. He was a hero. She was one of those wonderful creatures in the "Duchess" that she and Lucy used to read about in Lucy's playhouse. This wasn't Freedom. Esther and Harry weren't coasting. They were floating over the tops of mountains to Mars or Heaven.

Orme sat before his large work-desk in the living-room, haunted by what he had seen. The day was stained for him. He opened a drawer, took out a

note and read the postscript. "I don't think you are very wicked." Who but Esther Damon would have written that to him a year and a half ago? Again this afternoon in this hostile town her eyes had said, "I don't think you're very wicked." How much toleration might she not have for Clancy? Robert looked about the bare cabin walls. The only picture in his possession was this bit of cardboard in his hand. The green night, the great golden moon, produced a wonderful illusion. He placed the picture over the fireplace. Then he walked away to look. Near the moon were two strokes of white chalk. They might have been intended for two clouds or for . . . two souls. He gazed until he was in a world he had never seen, where nights were emerald and gold. He lived in that world. He was one of those white clouds. This was another miracle.

He scarce noticed when Carter brought the letters from the post-office and placed them at his side. Not until there was silence without, and the snow fell in large, swift, fast-melting flakes, did he read by the light of the log, that the furniture and carpets at the Exposition in the city had been sold.

CHAPTER X

ORME'S world was transformed. Three persons in New York had bought his furniture. Perhaps there would be thirty. Thirty promised three hundred. Three hundred would span the wide chasm between success and failure. Success was his goal. For he believed he could do a big, permanent thing—he could humanize commerce in the village. He summoned the men who had helped him build the house and work-shop. Mearns and Tribble returned with glad eyes and glad hearts. They sang as they worked. They were paid in more than gold for their toil. Their tools were more than wood and steel. They were love and joy.

Two expert cabinet-makers came from Buffalo. They did not know what to make of this Robert Orme kind of a world, the doors of which were never closed, which was a hospital for lame dogs, tramps, and sufferers. The little factory was like a house of worship. Robert's living-room was given to the men. His evening hours were theirs. And many strange, pent-up confessions came to his ears. Though he did his best to democratize the industry, to sweep away the cruelties of established society, he was not satisfied. He desired more for the men than they

hoped for themselves. He determined as soon as possible to cease living on the profits of his employees' toil.

The demand for Mrs. Brewster's rag carpets increased Orme's hopes. The carpets were liked even better than his furniture, especially those of which the greens weren't green and the blues weren't blue. "What city folks can see in those washed-out colors is more than I can understand," was Mrs. Brewster's pleased comment. "I like something I can see without specks."

But city folks saw so much in the carpets that Mrs. Brewster's shuttle flew all day and far into the night. When spring came, carpet-weaving had expelled the boarders. In May she and Orme decided that more looms must be purchased and that additional women must be engaged to sew rags and "trip the treadle."

Orme placarded Spear's, Hood's, and Chase's drug-store with requests for weavers. Many women in Freedom could weave, and the thrifty creatures pricked up their ears. Making rag carpet was easy. The women saw a means of procuring pin money; but no sooner did they consider working for Orme than the venture took on social and theological aspects. Would it be prudent for young girls, spinsters, and matrons to have even formal business relations with a drunkard like Orme—an infidel whose opinions were a crime, a man who attempted to murder his wife? Of course Orme the employer was a different person from Orme the bankrupt.

He was more respectable. He had paid his bill at Clancy's, and the postmaster reported that considerable sums had been transferred by him to Robert. But Mrs. Snead at her quilting-bee decided the social side of the question. Grandmother as she was, she wouldn't risk her good name by darkening that man's door.

The Baptist and Congregational ministers who thought for Freedom, theologically, had not met since an unlucky union revival meeting two years previously. Now they came together to define Robert's status among church-members. Backed up with many biblical quotations it was; Christians must draw the line somewhere. The solid element of the community must wash their hands of him. Let Robert Orme find his work-women among the ne'er-do-wells gathered about him.

Such was the little corner of the world where Robert hoped the "I" would be abolished, where the Golden Rule would become second nature, and brotherhood would reign. He realized that his had been a tipsy dream. Kindness had not touched the village to kindness. None would work for him save the wife and daughter of the blacksmith, Michael Magee. Orders for carpets must remain unfulfilled unless Orme should send to Ripon for helpers. The size and uncertainty of the industry rendered this plan impracticable.

At the same time Mrs. Brewster was almost as trying as Freedom. Her Massachusetts prejudice against those so unfortunate as not to be born in

the United States was a fresh obstacle. "I'm American, Bobby. None of them amalgamated foreigners in my house, no!" The final syllable was a fiat. "My grandfather fought at Bunker Hill and my father trained in the Massachusetts militia for years. Foreigners are nothing but spies." To Mrs. Brewster her house was a fortress held by her in readiness for saving the nation from foreign invasion.

"But the Magees aren't foreigners," Orme said. "They are decent people, born in America."

She was not to be shaken in her edict. "They're Catholics."

"So were we all, Aunty, not so long ago."

Mrs. Brewster massacred history with, "Mebbe you, Bobby. Never me."

"What does it matter?" Orme held out in vexation. "Why should we care? Those you call real Americans won't work for me. I'm grateful to the Magees if they'll come. You'll let them, won't you, Aunty? They'll be here to-morrow morning."

Mrs. Brewster would give no direct answer; but Robert knew that after she had talked herself out she would yield. This was her way. "I've had my sleeves rolled up for thirty years, but these people in Freedom won't work," Orme heard her say as he left the house. "They're afraid of you, Bobby. Christianity!" she snorted, "Don't talk to me of Christianity in Freedom. They don't know the meaning of the word. Jesus would be glad to be crucified to get out of this place."

Ordinarily, Mrs. Brewster's tirades amused Orme,

but not to-day. He quitted her because he could endure no more. He was tired of bitterness, anger, hatred, unforgiveness. He longed for solitude. Yes, Freedom was unprepared for brotherhood, and would remain unprepared until some distant Utopian day never to be seen by him. But this was no reason for altering his course. He was working, not only for Freedom, but for himself. The world would be readier for brotherhood if first he made Robert Orme worthy.

With a conscious effort of the will he steadied himself for the ascent of the hill, his disjointed thoughts focussed on the hopelessness of his vision. At a certain point in the road, as was his custom, he halted, looking back. Esther Damon, very near, now bounded toward him. When she saw him she paused. The sight of the girl annulled his vexation. He removed his hat. He wondered if she wished to speak with him, or if by any chance she had come to pray. Robert noticed the restlessness of her ungloved hands as she resumed her pace. He suspected she was nervous; but there was no flush in the pale, fine skin. Her large, heavy-lidded eyes gazed at him with the calm of a statue. In the silky, contralto voice he recalled so well, she explained her presence. "Mr. Orme, I read the notice in the post-office that you would like some women to sew rags and learn to weave."

What destiny sent her to him the second time in a crisis!

"Yes, I'd like to employ some weavers, but people

are so afraid of me in this village that I can't get them."

"I'm not afraid," she answered. "I tell every one you gave mother that picture of Wesley." The realization that Esther Damon had defended him gave Orme a dizzy feeling. "Do you think I could ever earn five dollars?" she asked. He did not answer until she said despairingly, "Oh, you don't think so."

"Yes, Mrs. Brewster makes as much weaving as she did with all her boarders."

"Mrs. Brewster weaves all the time, doesn't she? I couldn't do that. I shouldn't be able to give more than an hour or two a day—because——"

"Because?" he questioned in gentle scrutiny, "Because?"

It came out with some difficulty. "Working for you would have to be a secret from my father and mother."

In this moment he wished she had never seen him at Clancy's. "Because I'm so very bad, they think?"

"Oh, you're not wicked—not *really* wicked. Only you don't believe in God."

"I really do prefer stars to candles. Is that so bad?"

"You don't seem very different to me from any one else, Mr. Orme. Perhaps you never heard very much about God. But I'm worse. I was brought up on Him. I try to love Him, but I can't. I never saw a spirit or an angel in my life. My mother sees them every day. I love only the things I see. This is the

first time I ever dared say it. But I must talk to some one." He saw how great had been her need of confession, when with such candor she gave him her confidence. "Perhaps I oughtn't to say it, but how can I love God when He wants me to wear such homely things? I hate everything I have on. Look at my shoes." She made a motion to kick them from her feet. "They're too large for me and were given me by Sister Simpkins. Jesus told her to give them to me after she had worn them out. It was very nice of her, but I'm the only girl in Freedom who wears these heavy shoes in the summer. No one ever had a hat like mine."

Orme believed her. It was a little gray blending of bonnet and hat, and Orme believed too that no one ever looked in it quite as she did. Esther did not realize that the hat seemed exquisitely made for her any more than she knew that the gray gown was a perfect background for her hair. "Isn't it strange," she went on, "that God should ever want any one to look like this? He does and my father and mother say He'll punish me if I ever wear anything else. That's another reason why my work must be a secret. But I'd rather God did punish me if I can only have some bright flowers in my hat, and a bottle of perfume, and some lace collars and cuffs and a ribbon bow. I think I could get them all for five dollars."

Orme would have been moved to mirth had he not made out of her words a strong recoil against the restriction of her skimped environment. He won-

dered how far her revolt would carry her. "You ought easily to be able to get those things, but," he hesitated, "where shall you wear them?"

"When I'm at Lucy Yates's, at school, anywhere except when I'm at home. If Father and Mother ever saw such things on me they would think I was lost. They'd think I was as bad as——"

He supplied the word. "The infidel. Oh, yes, I know what they call me." He had never been so wounded by the disapproval of the village. He longed to beg this girl to believe the best of him. But why should she consider him at all?

"You'll think I'm awfully deceitful in having secrets from my parents, but I can't help it. You'll not tell?"

"No one."

"That's splendid," she said, clasping her hands. "And after I've earned my ribbons and lace. . . ." He waited for her words. "I'll work for nothing, if only you'll prepare me for college as you're teaching Lucy Yates. I'll finish the Academy this year, then I'll study for Mount Holyoke and go with Lucy."

"Why do you want to go to college?"

"To get away from Freedom and have a chance in life," she exclaimed, her voice vibrant with intensity. "If I stay here much longer I'll beat the air with my fists. It just chokes me. Do you think I can go?"

They reached the top of the hill. Her eager glance told him how much his answer meant to her. "I'm sure of it," he answered quietly. "Why not?"

She moved toward him impulsively. "Oh, I'm so happy. To-morrow I'm going to sit in the stage before it starts and say to it, 'Some day you're going to take me, too.' I'll go to Ripon and then to Mount Holyoke, away into another state."

His imagination lingered on the possibilities of her future. "And after Mount Holyoke?"

"After I graduate I want to teach school. Won't that be glorious?"

He could not see her as a school-teacher; but he smiled at her delight. She went on as if she saw a mirage of splendor. "Some day I'll earn so much money teaching that I'll buy a white dress and one the color of lilacs just like the dress of the city girl who is visiting Harry Clancy's sister. She looks like a fashion plate. I never had a white or lilac dress in my life." Orme observed that Maggie Clancy was merely Harry Clancy's sister. His thought raced back to the December day which still haunted him. Could it be, he asked himself uneasily, that these feminine longings for adornment had been awakened by Harry Clancy? Impossible. "I'm away ahead of Irving Yates in school. Do you think you can prepare me for college in a year?"

"A year!" he repeated. A year of being with her every day! "Let me see—" His eyes half closed. "A year." What would he not give for such a year? Did such years really come to men? His thoughts suffocated him. Of how much had he been cheated! One year at her side would excuse life. "Yes, I should think so," he added calmly and then ques-

tioned, "But do your parents wish you to go to college?"

"No—no," she shook her head as if he had thrust a fearful obstacle within her view. "I pray every night to go to college, and I'm sure I shall. But they want me to go to Japan as a missionary to the heathen. Sometimes I think I'm a heathen myself and it would be wicked of me to go. I'd so much rather stay right here and work day and night to get money to go to college."

Her touching, absorbing little ambition moved Robert. He would have been happy to annul her need of struggle; but he was helpless. He was in so strange and unexpressed a relation to her mother that he could not go farther without reference to the bent and feeble old lady who seemed always to be gazing at a vision of the crucifixion. "What will Mrs. Damon say?" he asked.

"I don't know, or rather I do know, but I pray she'll change her mind," she answered despairingly. "I can't be a missionary. All my life I've committed to memory psalms and I've read aloud Pilgrim's Progress, Fox's Book of Martyrs, and Jeremy Taylor's Sermons. I've tried to pray in the streets with my mother, but though I was starved for days, and father carried me to the altar in his arms—they broke the ice for my baptism in the dead of winter—I was never really converted. I don't see Heaven, nor hell. I don't have visions. I can't be a missionary; yet I can't grieve them by saying so. Sometimes I'm afraid my not wishing

to go means something dreadful. Perhaps I have devils in me. Do you suppose I have?" she anxiously asked.

When Orme saw the stress under which this question of faith caused her to labor, he wondered if he ought not challenge her home training. He restrained himself out of respect for the sincerity, the self-imposed poverty, and the lives of self-abnegation of her parents. "Why, you poor child," he answered, "of course you haven't. No one has—except perhaps me," he added with a smile.

"Don't you think so?" she questioned dubiously.

"You wish to live as all girls should. You dwell on natural human tendencies until you magnify them into wrong doings. That is the history of saints."

"Saints!" she approached him lest even the air surrounding them should hear. "You don't know." She drew in a deep breath as if preparatory to confessing a series of Borgian murders. "You don't understand. Lucy Yates taught me to dance and I love it. We dance at her house. I like Cooper's novels even better than I do Pilgrim's Progress. We don't have music in our church, but I adore it—even Catholic music. I stand at the window sometimes during service and feel as if I'd like to sing and dance in the streets."

He watched the play of her great, burning, dark eyes as she recounted her pathetic efforts to live more fervently, to transcend the limits of her narrow life. She was too tempestuous for the every-

day tranquil, shaded village. Even in the castaway garments of Mrs. Simpkins, as she stood before Orme, he could close his eyes and see her a great tragic actress, on an ancient throne, inspiring a splendid cause. But here she was in Freedom. Could a bottle hold a cyclone? How was he not to lose sight of the obligation he felt toward her mother, and yet with honesty to counsel her? Lucy Yates would have been a simple case. Why wasn't she Lucy Yates? "Don't trouble yourself about these trivial things," he finally said. "Even your God never thinks of them. They are no more to Him than the shavings are to us cabinet-makers when we make a set of furniture. Life is much bigger than the shavings. It will be for you."

"And you know so much too—Dr. Yates says more than any one in Freedom," she said, visibly awed. "Tell me again you believe I shall really go to college, Mr. Orme."

He could not connect her with the definite discipline of Mount Holyoke, but he answered: "I hope you will; and that your parents will give their consent."

She drew a long breath. "May I begin work to-day?"

"Any time you wish. If you will come with me to Mrs. Brewster's I'll explain what there is to do. The carpets are woven there; but as soon as we get space the work will all be done here on the hill."

"Oh, Mrs. Brewster." Esther hesitated. "She is the Universalist lady."

"Do you object to going there?"

"No, I don't mind," she slowly returned. "I was thinking of how she scolded the last time my mother went. I don't know that I shall blame her if she is very angry with me for coming. Of course she doesn't understand that Jesus tells my mother to pray for her. I'm afraid Mrs. Brewster thinks we believe we are better than others; but I know we are all poor sinners."

For the second time Orme perceived Esther Damon beautifully trying to be nice to him about his moral delinquencies. He stopped in the road as they were making the descent to the village. "Your prayers didn't vex me. They were so many kind thoughts coming when I needed them. I've always been grateful to you."

"Were you?" she answered. "I'm glad. People get so vexed when we pray for them. Sometimes I'm afraid not to go the way my mother wants me. She's so sure Jesus is on her side that He must be."

"No prayers, to-day," Mrs. Brewster called through the green screen door when she saw Esther. "I'm busy."

Robert explained as he opened the door for the girl to pass before him, "Miss Damon has come to sew rags and learn weaving from you."

"Well, land sakes, have you?" the widow said with one of her infrequent smiles. She even rose from her loom. "I'm glad Americans ain't all dead or ashamed to work in this fly-away, scatter-brained town. What's your name?"

"Esther."

Orme lingered to interpret gently to the girl the gruffness of Mrs. Brewster. He watched the widow show her pupil how to "fill the loom," "trip the treadle," and "throw the shuttle." Then in a daze of delight he again climbed the hill. Perhaps there would be months like this afternoon.

There was an unusual stir at his gate. Men were unloading red plush, machine-turned, black walnut furniture from a lumber wagon. Who was hoaxing him? He hastened into the cabin. The living-room was a chaos of chairs and tables. In the south wing was Alice directing Carter in the arrangement of her belongings. Red plush furniture discorded with his beautiful, simple handicraft no more than Alice's soul with his.

"You're right, Robert," the wife said amiably, holding out her hand. "It's foolish to live apart in a village like Freedom. I've decided not to be angry any longer. Brother Trask says we should make the best of marriage. This is the room you intended for me, isn't it?" He could not answer. "Of course this isn't like pa's house, but I can stand it with this new furniture. I had it shipped from Buffalo. Isn't it stylish?"

Orme leaned heavily against the wall. He tried to keep from speaking. He feared he should turn her out of doors and pitch after her the red plush furniture. Now he knew he had never grown until he was free. He realized in the old days he had often gone to Clancy's to escape her irritating tongue and their life barren of comradeship. There was

no fine living with her. Should he allow her to come back and check his development—this wife who stood between him and all he desired? No such difficult question had yet presented itself. His new conscience asked, was his growth to be selfish? Had he no responsibility to her?

"Yes, Alice," he said at last. "I mean, this is the room I built for you. . . . I hope you will be happy here, and that we shall get on better." He could utter no other words.

He turned into the living-room. Stumbling over the furniture he crossed to the mantel and took up the little picture made by Esther Damon. During the winter he had kept it there where the firelight might play on it. He placed the card-board on the table. To his horror he recalled it was his wedding anniversary. Only to turn back the calendar and erase that day! Would the afternoon never pass? He entered his own room, then went out to the workshop. Temptation, stiletto in hand, dogged him. He rejoined the cabinet-makers and began planing a table.

CHAPTER XI

ESTHER stepped into Wherritt's store with her first five dollars earned as a weaver. For a month she had lived for this golden moment. Hitherto Wherritt's had been a place of forbidden splendors. Now the beautiful new green bank-note was a talisman of admission to its marvels. It was like sorcery that she, Esther Damon, should buy a bottle of that perfume in the show-case. She sprayed her handkerchief. The romance was prolonged. She had only to ask for some of the long-coveted lavender ribbon, and it became her very own. Already, she saw the bows she should wear at her throat like those of Lucy Yates. The fashion had been brought to Freedom by that city girl, the guest of the Clancys, who was the local feminine standard of luxury. A pair of white lace mittens and a lavender-bordered pocket handkerchief took their place among Esther's possessions. So little did the minister's daughter, in her life of penury, know of the purchasing power of money, that she was astonished when told by Ira Wherritt that she might still have the lace cuffs and one of those wide collars. The lace was coarse and of common weave; but to Esther's starved senses it was a filmy, fairy web. The magic wand disappeared in the Wherritt till. The door of the palace

of witchery was closed. To such an extent had the girl's nature been checked that she went homeward pale with joy at the thought of her first little lies secreted in her pocket.

Mrs. Damon sat by the sitting-room table, reading a religious journal. On Esther's arrival she put aside her paper and removed her spectacles to receive her daughter's embrace. At one time the good lady had worn gold-cased glasses; but she felt that her Heavenly Father had severely chastised her for such self-indulgence and vanity. Now her spectacles were encased in nickel. Always when she spoke her countenance showed a sweetly human, sad smile. Caressing her daughter's hand, she said, "I hope Dr. and Mrs. Yates are well."

"Yes, mother, very well." On her return from work Esther had stopped a moment at the Yates'. Now she was aware she had done so to be able truthfully to answer similar questions. She seized the opportunity to acquaint her mother with what was in her mind for the future. "Lucy is going to college two years from now. Mr. Orme, who is preparing Irving, is to teach her."

"Of course Lucy will enjoy that, dear little child," Mrs. Damon observed indulgently. "But of what value is mere temporal knowledge? The only truths are those of the spirit."

Esther realized that her mother possessed the peaceful wisdom of the spirit; but the girl felt that such knowledge was congenital and could never be hers. "Perhaps I'm wrong, mother," she answered,

"but I want temporal knowledge. I'd love to go to college with Lucy. I can be just as good a Christian there as here." To forestall objections, she quickly added, "Why not? I'm willing to work my way."

"You dreaming child!" Mrs. Damon chided. "How can a poor girl like you work your way through a great college?"

"In Mr. Orme's carpet factory. He finds it hard to get women to weave. Lucy says I can earn lots of money there. Every afternoon he gives a little lecture. If I weave for him Lucy thinks he will prepare me for college for nothing."

"I'm glad Mr. Orme is earning a living."

"Mother!" the girl began; but Mrs. Damon's forefinger on lips signalled silence.

At that instant both saw the Reverend Hezekiah Damon on his old black horse pass before the side window on his way to the barn where he kept the faithful, jaded beast which for years had carried him from one charge to another on his circuit. Elder Damon ministered to the souls of Attica and Olivet as well as Freedom. He rose always at four o'clock, Wesley's hour; cared for his horse; opened his church; swept it; cleaned the lamps. For his manifold duties his salary was two hundred dollars a year. As he entered the sitting-room, his grave lips grimly compressed, his deep gray ascetic eyes set under over-jutting brows, his close-cropped hair suggested a militant priest or an aging Napoleon Bonaparte. Though the preacher had been absent several days, he had only a hand-clasp from his wife and his

daughter. He invited affection no more than does the Plymouth Rock.

"Well, husband," asked Mrs. Damon, as he hung up his hat, "have your meetings been blessed this week?"

"Wonderfully blessed, Prudence," he answered, a smile like a gleam of steel showing in his eyes as he took possession of an arm-chair near his wife. "I never saw anything like it. Olivet astonished me even after my forty years' experience. Those big, rough logging-camp workers who drink hard cider came into the meeting. They shouted, fell, and became Christians. Old members like brother and sister Jenkins got wonderfully blessed."

"Yes, yes." Mrs. Damon followed her husband's words in delight. "Oh, Hezekiah, I wish this rheumatism—I know I violated some of our dear Father's laws or I shouldn't be afflicted with it—I wish it hadn't kept me at home. Then Esther and I might have been at the meeting." She glanced at her daughter who was placing some peaches on the oil-cloth covered supper table.

"I felt you and Esther were with me, Prudence, especially in Attica. Our folks in Attica are pretty fashionable; but the whole congregation rose, shouted and sang. It reminded me of the old days of Brother Cartwright's time, before Methodists became so worldly. But here in Freedom, where I preach and pray, where you exhort wherever you find a sinner, I feel we together don't reach them. I get so discouraged." His head rested on his hands. In this

attitude of dejection one noted the pathetic humility of the patched black alpaca coat and the white paper collar.

"No, no, Hezekiah," his wife consoled, "you must never fail in courage. We can't if we have faith. Pray always for faith."

"Of course there are the few faithful pilgrims," he said, groping for comfort. "But look at the backsliders. Look at the Nearbys who went to the Baptist church; and the Bares who went to the Congregationalist—all enticed by church socials, donation parties, oyster-suppers, organs, pew-renting, and fine clothes. That's how they want to worship God in Freedom. The Methodists here grow fewer and fewer every day."

"Never mind, Hezekiah," the wife answered, and he saw that her eyes, the fires of which seemed extinguishable, could flash as in youth. "Let's not feel sorry for ourselves. Rags are our garments, but we're clothed in purple. It doesn't matter if only one of us is left to talk of God; we shall still be the church. Walls and roofs don't matter. We'll preach in the streets. The forest shall be our temples. Our dome shall be the dome of Heaven. The walls of our church shall be the walls of the universe." Mrs. Damon touched his hand. "Hezekiah, we'll save Freedom yet." She believed all her husband believed, but with a passion he knew not.

"I don't know, wife. I don't know." He rose, went to the window, and looked out on the unoffending village as if it were a half-savage wilderness

which it was his mission to redeem. "Sometimes," he said, "I think Freedom is the wickedest place in the world. Sometimes I think the devil has Freedom."

"Oh, father," protested Esther as she indicated that their supper was on the table. "Don't say that."

"Yes, daughter," he repeated, "I'm afraid he has. God doesn't hear my words here. I'd gladly go to the stake to break up this ice in the heart of Freedom, to save one soul here."

To Esther her father was a spectacle, a great tragic spectacle, unintelligible, but moving. Why was she so deficient in his kind of sensibility? The pretty little lies in her pocket throbbed against her side. Perfume from the handkerchief filled her nostrils. What would her father say if he saw her baubles? In renewed alarm she wondered if the devil had her as well as Freedom.

After prayers the Damons sat before the cold supper of milk, boiled eggs, and peaches which they ate from Saturday evening until Sunday at the setting of the sun. At this time candor urged Esther to share with her family her hope of going to college and to gain from her father, especially, some expression of approval. "Father," she began fearfully, "do you mind very much—I'm very anxious to know what you think of it—if I try to go to college? I can, you know—at least, I think I can."

"Yes, Hezekiah," interjected Mrs. Damon, taking

up her daughter's theme, "Esther has this idea, and you, better than I, can show her its folly. She hopes to go to college by working for Robert Orme, who used to be the town drunkard. He has a carpet factory and employs weavers. You will show Esther that even if she could spare the time to go to college, money from such a source would bring her only doubtful happiness."

"Of course, Esther." Her father's frown and falling inflection crushed her hope. "Mr. Orme denies the Word of God. He profanes the Sabbath. He is one of the worst men in the village."

"But he's better now," Esther argued gently. "Don't you remember he gave mother that portrait of Wesley?" Elder Damon coughed and looked at his wife.

Mrs. Damon met the lunge. "And it was very kind of Mr. Orme. I always felt that much good in him was destroyed by his life."

Esther's courage was high. "He doesn't drink any more. He has built such a pretty house himself. We pass it as we go to the lake to swim and row."

"I'm glad he doesn't drink, child," answered Elder Damon more kindly. "Very glad."

Esther felt she was gaining. "And he's so very good to every one that works for him. He makes them do beautiful things. If only you could talk with him——"

The parents stared at their daughter. Mrs. Damon said, "But you speak, my dear, as if you knew——"

Esther was all confusion. "Lucy Yates says so. She says Mr. Orme has made a new man of Mr. Mearns, the carpenter—the man we tried to get to come to church."

"Does he do this for Jesus?" Elder Damon questioned.

"I don't think so," Esther reluctantly admitted, "but Dr. Yates likes him, and Mr. Orme is going to prepare Lucy for college. Dr. Yates thinks he's good enough for that."

"Dr. Yates goes to the Baptist church about three times a year." The minister's ultimatum consigned the physician to the doom of all idolaters.

"Perhaps if you'd allow me to work for Mr. Orme," Esther persisted, "he might feel sorry he's so bad and become a Christian."

"No, Esther," the minister returned. "Robert Orme works for this world, not the next. He's not good enough for association with a Christian girl. You must choose between God and the world." Although the minister had seen his own uncushioned pews emptied by the more modern preachers, never had he been tempted to modify his strait-jacket discipline.

The girl leaned over the table in her eagerness. "Perhaps, Father, Mr. Orme's might be the first soul you would save in Freedom."

Elder Damon was inflexible. "That would make me very happy, Esther; but I can't allow you to work for an infidel. You don't need a college education to be a missionary. People never talked about

missionaries going to college until their religion lost some of the fire of God. Everything you need to know is in that book." He indicated the Bible.

Esther's will on crucial occasions beat its wings in protest against the granite force of her father. To-day it was to her gain of heredity that she would not abandon her desire.

"Father, perhaps," she ventured, "I'm not fit to be a missionary."

"Not fit?" He sounded the question as if she were doubting the Bible. "Not fit? If you are not fit, Esther, who is?"

"It isn't your fault or mother's," she answered. "I know that with my bringing-up I should be ready, but one reason why I want to go to college is to think over and test my belief during four years."

Elder Damon and his wife were possessed of clear, cloudless faith. Each looked at the other as if their daughter had suddenly become a very terrible young woman. "You are not sure of your faith?" The minister's question was emphasized as if the girl had already said, "I am not sure this is Esther." "Can it be," he went on, "you've been tempted by the world? Next year when the call for missionaries comes, is there anything to stand in the way of your complete self-surrender to duty?"

The girl felt the presence of the collar, the cuffs, the bottle of perfume in her pocket. She yearned to cast them all before her parents and to confess the shortcomings which menaced her future. But she could not give up youth. In silence which seemed

like disobedience she went about her work of carrying dishes into the kitchen. Prayers in the Damon home that evening were so long and fervent that Esther herself seemed responsible for the wrongdoing of the village.

Sunday.

Sunday, spoken in whispered emphasis. Sunday in Freedom. Silence at the Four Corners. A drowsy silence, holding the village under a spell until eight o'clock when the bell of the little Catholic church summoned Papists to mass. Soon from east, west, north, and south farmers' wagons streamed into town. Every one was so solemn that even the trees seemed pulpits. At half after ten the bells of the Baptist and Congregational churches tried to outclang each other. The call of faith alone foregathered the Methodists in their humble meeting-house.

First came the Reverend Hezekiah Damon, wearing the familiar black alpaca coat and brown straw hat. By his side Mrs. Damon kept slow pace. In the little reverential procession followed Esther, heavenly-minded and demure of aspect—that is, heavenly-minded and demure as possible for one of her height, eyes, and hair. In her glance was repressed martyrdom; but she did not raise her gaze above the plane of the psalm-book and the Bible she carried. Mrs. Damon and Esther seated themselves on the second row of the bare benches not far from the large stove, in which there was no fire. The minister's head was bowed over the table on which

lay the great Bible. Thus the three waited in the empty church.

Soon after them came Brother Simpkins—a lanky, bow-legged man with a sparse gray beard, fringing a florid, thin, peaked face. Sister Simpkins, the female counterpart of her husband, as the wife of the rich man of the church, wore a Paisley shawl and a glittering bonnet which tied under her chin. Hannah Simpkins, their daughter—a rounded, podgy girl—was like a changeling in the family. The Simpkinses were always first; but subsequently arrived Brother and Sister Killit, Sister Fish, Brother Grimes, and Brother and Sister Thornson. Carter, the only colored man of the village, in splendid Sunday apparel, humbly took his seat in the rear of the church. Before Elder Damon raised his head the incoming footfalls indicated to him that there were ten persons besides his wife and daughter in the meeting-house. This was the smallest number to which he had ever preached.

In a moving voice, the minister rose and delivered a sermon on the destruction awaiting those of little faith. As if to punctuate the words of her husband, at intervals, Mrs. Damon looked at her daughter. The father's glance also always lingered near the girl. Brother Simpkins and Carter shouted "Amen!" and Sister Killitt clapped her hands as the minister exceeded his own eloquence. Esther, alone, sat unheeding, present only in the body.

In the little church, Elder Damon, in spite of his self-appointed poverty, or because of it, was canon-

ized. Among the Methodists, Esther, destined as she was for perilous, foreign missionary work, was deferred to as the princess royal of a dynasty of holiness. At the close of the service the church-members gathered about their pastor and his family. Sister Killitt wiped the tears from her eyes as she kissed Esther. In a voice charged with sanctity she said, "Wasn't that a grand sermon, Sister Esther?"

The girl gave her unvarying Sunday answer, "Yes, father always preaches beautifully."

"How blessed you are," went on Sister Killitt, placing her hands upon Esther's shoulders, "to have such parents, such a home, always to have the fire of God poured right into your heart."

When similar remarks were addressed to Esther, horrid things crowded into her imagination until revolt seemed imminent. She longed to stamp her feet and cry out her dislike of all which kept her a prisoner in this black pit of Sunday. She always shuddered at the possibility that her inclinations should be stifled, her nature thwarted until she made an outbreak. Though the Sunday-school classes were already assembling she hurried to the door for air.

There was a slight stir in the street. People were leaving the houses of worship. She turned in the direction of the Catholic church and saw Harry Clancy lift his hat. He was nearly a block away, but their young eyes easily travelled the distance. The air, the trees, the sunlight, the wind, the earth, everything separating her from him was also the

exquisite medium which related them. She was at the age when she was mad to charm and to be charmed. An electric fluid seemed to bathe her. Sparks of fire followed one another through her nerves. Esther flung toward Clancy a graceful, intimate gesture fraught with meaning.

Her joy was short-lived. Again she looked. Not only Harry's sister at his side, but the girl in the lavender gown. On seeing their pleasing apparel Esther felt that each thread of her own dull gray dress—even before its term of service to Sister Simpkins the stuff had cost twelve cents a yard at Wherritt's—each coarse thread accentuated her humiliation. Before her on every hand were girls in lavender dresses. They were in the air, swinging from the trees, mocking her. If only once she could look like that city girl in the lavender gown who spent her summers at the Ivy Green. Esther knew her name was Stella. What a lovely name, she thought,—so light and graceful, suited to poems. Her own, Esther, was fit only for prose. Harry would drive with Stella and his sister in the afternoon, so he had told Esther, only because she could not go with him. No, she must be confined in that prison of piety, her home. She dragged herself back to her Sunday-school class which she taught because she was the minister's daughter and because she loved children. To-day the children were noisy in their corner. They laughed and talked in a way that would have scandalized the older people had the teacher not been Esther Damon.

The preacher's family ate no dinner Sundays, taking only a cold supper; so Esther's work consisted of reading aloud from the Psalms and Pilgrim's Progress. The contents of these books were so threadbare to the girl that she followed her own voice only in subconsciousness. After an hour devoted to this duty, she patched together an excuse about a headache. In reality, so splendid was her physical endowment that she had never known pain nor a sense of fatigue; but she was permitted to go upstairs.

Esther passed through the dark, windowless hall into her room and closed the door. She was free. Her pillow was her treasure chest, and therefrom she drew her precious purchases; the perfume, the lace collar and cuffs, the silk mittens. At first she touched them as if they would vanish if breathed upon. Then impressively she ranged them before her on the bed. They were all hers, quite hers, earned with her own nimble fingers. Each object should help make her more like the girl in the lavender dress.

Presently she viewed herself in a little broken triangle of a mirror tacked to the wall, a gift from Lucy Yates. Lucy, a year younger than Esther, had already ceased dressing her hair like a school-girl. Esther would arrange hers like a woman. She used to hate her hair. Now she loved its great billows. Harry said it was beautiful. There it was in his note she drew from her pillow. "Your hair is beautiful. You are beautiful. I love you."

When she read the last sentence she stopped

brushing her hair and buried her face in her hands. How she had always hungered for words like those! How she had envied Lucy her facile conquests! School-boys had showered Lucy with candy mottoes, "I love you," "Kiss me," and followed them with notes of adoration. Lucy had only to shake her curls to enslave even the school-master. The day before the sex-experienced Lucy had said Harry was the best-looking boy in Freedom. She wished she could invite him to her next party. It was nice of Lucy, Esther reflected. People were so unchristian to Harry. He couldn't help being the son of the tavern-keeper any more than she could help being the daughter of a clergyman. Harry didn't look like the tavern. He grew handsomer every day, and he went to the city so much that his manners were like the "world." Above all, he was Esther's romance. That was the great thing for her starved soul.

Again she took up the brush, twisted the soft coils about her head until they royally crowned her and formed a classic line of which she was unaware. She bathed her hands and face in violet water until she lost sensibility to the perfume. But her great final rite was putting on the lace collar. Before adjusting the collar to her fine, strong, white neck, where she fastened it with a bow of lavender ribbon, she stroked it as a dear, human thing. Why wouldn't the ribbon expand into a dress? After pinning on her cuffs Esther felt like a different being. She wasn't queer-looking any more.

Esther did not realize that her usual severity of apparel emphasized her beauty, nor that she was always splendid when unornamented. Nor did she know that for her to accept the silly mode of Freedom was to detract from her appearance. She had the aspect of having crawled into clothes too small for her, but she rejoiced in her dazzling "best" which was her worst. Wouldn't Harry like her so? If only he could see her! Her face clouded. He was with that city girl who was fair and slender. To be like Stella, or—to see Harry to-morrow at the lake and hear him say again that no one was so beautiful as she!

Summoned by her mother to prepare the homely supper, Esther hastily concealed her belongings. Once more downstairs in the atmosphere of piety she was troubled that she knew no sense of sin for her manner of passing the afternoon. Wasn't there something wrong in one who, without turmoil of conscience, could joy in vanity and secret love on a Sabbath? God and Heaven had become stale theological phrases; but Harry Clancy was a reality. What did she lack?

As Esther went about her work, Elder Damon, who was talking with his wife, paused to observe his daughter and to whiff the air. "What is the matter, Hezekiah?" Mrs. Damon asked.

Dumb, he sat staring at Esther. Finally, as the girl deposited a bowl of rice on the table, she herself put the inquiry, "What is the matter, Father?"

"Esther, come here," he said gravely. Under his

scrutiny the girl showed puzzled eyes. She wondered if they had found Harry's letter-box under the front steps. "Daughter, what have you put on yourself this afternoon?"

"Nothing, Father."

"Nothing, Esther? You've something you shouldn't have," he insisted menacingly.

Had she forgotten to hide the collar? Esther's quick fingers sought her throat. No, the collar was concealed. "I think you are mistaken, Father."

"You're not given to double-dealing, Esther." The minister marked each word with a gesture of his forefinger. "In Buffalo, where I once went to attend the annual conference of our ministers, I met a woman in the streets, a beautiful, bepainted woman—not, I am afraid, a likely one. When I passed her she smiled. Her perfumery smelled like your clothing."

Mrs. Damon seconded with quaint simplicity, "Esther, I think I smell perfumery, too, but," she concluded with a plaintive plea for denial of the suspicion, "you haven't any, have you, Esther?"

"Yes, mother, I have," Esther grudgingly confessed.

"At least, Hezekiah," said Mrs. Damon sadly, "we can be thankful our daughter hasn't deceived us. I was a naughty child myself."

"It's only the perfume of violets," resisted the girl. "God made them. I'm sure He doesn't care if I smell them or use the perfume from them."

Elder Damon raised his hands when his daughter

set up her own judgment. "And do you pretend," he asked of her, "to understand what God wants?" He spoke to his wife in alarm. "Prudence, this is what comes of allowing Esther to associate with children of the world." His severest attention was fixed on his daughter when he asked, "Doesn't God care about how his children pass the Sabbath? Do you believe He gives no heed when a Christian girl besmears herself with perfume until she smells like the wicked women of the streets of Buffalo? If this is what you say, Esther, what is to be expected of Freedom?" He clenched his hand as he added to Mrs. Damon, "I tell you, Prudence, there's something corrupting in the very air of the place."

"Father," Esther timidly put forward, "isn't it possible that the reason why your church-members go to the Congregationalists and Baptists is that you ask too much of them? People can't be happy restrained every minute. If you didn't expect so much of your congregation, would it fall away?"

For the first time Esther questioned Elder Damon's tough exactions and he demanded, "What are you, anyway, Baptist, Unitarian, or Universalist? No wonder you were defending an infidel last night, and you want to work for him. The devil has had many guises in the past two thousand years. I know him. First he talks Catholic style, then Episcopalian style, then Unitarian style, then infidel style—something fixed up fine and easy to suit everybody. No rough-hewn cross of Christ for him, but a nice, pretty cross of gold. And the devil gets

along very well if you reckon him by the big grand churches—temples of idolaters where knowledge, success, rich men, everything but God is worshipped. But I'll never give in to him. It's boiled down to this." The minister smote the table in emphasis. "Are you for Christ or against Him? Are you with Jesus when it's costly, unpopular, and uncomfortable? Let other churches compromise with the devil and have their rich men and their great folk. My little meeting-house will see them go to pieces. We have the religion of the fishermen and the tent-makers—nothing else, because nothing but the religion of Paul and Silas will last." The old man voiced all the tragic pathos of one who bears the ragged, faded standard of a lost, magnificent faith. Turning to him Esther took his hand. He looked up at her and asked, "Are you going to be for the devil, or against him?"

"You'll always find me where you are, Father."

CHAPTER XII

ELDER DAMON and his wife had just returned from the camp-meeting when Brother Simpkins knocked timidly at the door of the parsonage. Brother Simpkins for the most part maintained the Methodist church in Freedom; but he was always poor in spirit in the presence of the man of God. To-day the minister himself received the visitor. Brother Simpkins flushed as the preacher's eyes fell on the offerings with which the layman was burdened. "Well, well, Brother Simpkins," exclaimed the pastor. "If this isn't just like you and Sister Simpkins! Peaches!" There was a basket of them on Brother Simpkins' arm. "The first of the season, I'm sure. Wife," he called to Mrs. Damon who came from the kitchen wiping her hands, "here are the eggs we prayed for this morning." The minister often seemed to regard his Maker as a benevolent, wholesale supply-merchant.

"Brother Simpkins!" said Mrs. Damon, shaking the hand of the parishioner who was grinning from his own joy in that of the minister and his wife. "And a roll of butter! This is too much! You and Sister Simpkins certainly are the stronghold of the Lord. What should we do without you?"

"It ain't much," returned the embarrassed brother,

"but it's all fresh from the farm." Brother Simpkins mopped his head with a large red handkerchief, coughed, blew his nose, and seated himself on the edge of one of the cane-bottomed chairs.

"I was sorry not to see you and Sister Simpkins at the Attica camp-meeting," said Mrs. Damon. "We were very blessed."

"Praise the Lord, Sister," returned the brother. "We were dreadful sorry we couldn't go; but it was my busy time and I have such trash for hired men that I have to keep an eye on 'em every minute."

"That is the tempter," admonished the clergyman. "Let God farm for you."

"I would, Brother Damon, if in your travels you'd find me a good hired man." Brother Simpkins laughed. He liked his own wit. "But Brother Damon," he continued, after a labored clearance of the throat, "I didn't come over for that. Your folks and my folks have always got along together first-rate. And if friends have got anything to say to each other, don't go beating about the bush, but out with it, I say."

Hereupon Brother Simpkins halted in advocacy of direct motion, twirled his hat and leaned back against the wall to place himself in equilibrium. In large alarm the minister and his wife followed the visitor's odd conduct. Elder Damon wondered if Brother Simpkins had come to suggest that the church buy an organ. Already the answer was in the preacher's mind. After an awkward pause the brother collected himself and went on with diffi-

culty: "I told Susan I didn't believe in beating about the bush or backbiting, and I was coming over here to ask you right out if you, Brother Damon, ain't violating church discipline. Ain't you comin' out for showy, gaudy dress? Ain't you gettin' too high-toned for the Methodists?"

For nearly forty years the preacher had held the scales of judgment. Now discovering himself the object weighed, brought a prompt exclamation of surprise. Mrs. Damon, however, unfailing in daily scrutiny of her own life, meekly answered: "I don't blame you, Brother Simpkins. I know the Lord doesn't entirely approve of mahogany horse-hair furniture. Shall I sell mine and give the proceeds to the heathen? I kept it because it belonged to my dear mother. She was an excellent woman even if she was an Episcopalian."

"No, Sister," replied Brother Simpkins, "it ain't horse-hair furniture. That's all right. Mebbe you think I'm an interferin' old fellow; but it's Esther. Folks are waggin' their tongues about Esther."

Elder Damon and his wife looked at each other. Disturbed and uneasy, the minds of both flew to the late revelation concerning Esther. After an interval the minister's thoughts steadied. He offered an explanation which he felt was a criticism of his own life. "Yes, Brother Simpkins, Lucy Yates did give Esther some perfumery. My wife and I prayed about it, and Esther won't use it again. Perhaps you recall, Brother, that sometimes young people are very wilful."

"Then I guess it's gone from perfumery to worse things." By softening his tone the visitor endeavored to absorb the force of the shock. "It's wearing lace, bows of ribbon, silk mitts. My daughter Hannah ain't allowed to wear such things. It's looking proud and worldly. Do you think a Methodist minister's daughter ought to do that?"

"Oh, Brother Simpkins," Mrs. Damon sighed in glad relief, "then it must all be a mistake. I can vouch for Esther. She hasn't one of these things."

Brother Simpkins shook his head with great solemnity. "I wish there was some mistake about it, but there ain't. I seen her myself. First Susan seen her. Women always do see things first. And then I seen her. It was hard to believe my own eyes."

"Are you quite sure?" questioned Mrs. Damon. "I've never seen them. Where could she get such things?"

"Susan says she gets them at the infidel's," explained Brother Simpkins. "She works there with all that trash, them godless folks."

"Esther did speak about it a long time ago," admitted Mrs. Damon, "but I had forgotten."

"Yes, she weaves carpets at that Universalist's, Mis' Brewster's. Everyone's talking about it because they think you know it. Brother Killit's mad clean through. He thinks you think we don't pay you enough."

"I can't say I blame them," Mrs. Damon conceded.

Brother Simpkins was emboldened to continue his revelations. "And that ain't the worst, Brother Damon. I know this would be tattling if it wasn't for the good of us all."

"It doesn't seem to me I can bear to hear the worst," said the minister woefully, "but go on, Brother. We are all given strength to meet each day."

"I wish Susan was here to tell it," began the visitor. "It ain't in my line to carry news. I'd rather take a lickin' any day; but Esther walks the streets with that miserable, billiard-playing, Irish-Catholic, Harry Clancy."

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Damon piteously, as though seeking to ward off physical hurt. "You're surely mistaken."

"I wish I was, Sister, but I ain't. They walked right into the post-office together—and they didn't take no notice of me, just as though they were sweethearting."

Hezekiah Damon's lips set, and his wife, seeing a storm in his eye remonstrated, "No, husband, don't let your anger control you."

So absorbed were both by Brother Simpkins' narrative that they had not noticed Esther as she came up the steps. Nor had they known of her approach until the door opened and there the girl—perfumed, beribboned, bemittened—in every detail verified the portrait of her given by the informant. "Esther Damon!" exclaimed the minister. "Esther Damon!" he repeated in horror. "So what all the brethren are saying about you is true."

Her pale face was held so high that she seemed too tall for the small, low-jointed room. Her eyes glowed with dizzying unhuman happiness. Her lips were scarlet, as if fresh from kisses. Everywhere in her aspect was the abandonment of vagrant liberty. "What are they saying, Father?"

The minister confronted his daughter with bitterness. "They say you look as you look, like one of those Buffalo women, proud and worldly, walking the streets in gaudy raiment."

"I know," she answered humbly, "having these ribbons unknown to you seems like telling lies. I hope you'll not be angry. I don't want to deceive you. I came home to show myself to you and mother as I am."

"As you are!" the minister replied. "Do you recall what the prophet Isaiah said when he saw the perfumed, wanton-eyed, mincing women of Jerusalem in the streets? Isaiah warned that he would take away their luxuries. He would give them branding instead of beauty. Isaiah lived, not only in Jerusalem, but in Freedom. He knew you, Esther. He saw you steeped in their sins. He saw you turn away from your missionary work and bedeck yourself with the finery of unbelievers, your friends, the Catholics."

"No, husband, don't say that," interposed Mrs. Damon. "Tell me, Esther, at least this isn't true. You didn't walk with the son of the tavern-keeper, did you?"

"Yes, mother," she answered. "Every one else was horrid to him, and so I walked with him."

Mrs. Damon still hoped for a truth not for her ears. "Not more than once, dear child?"

"More than once," the girl confessed.

"Why, Esther, I don't understand." In her ingenuousness Mrs. Damon could not comprehend why youth strays afoot with youth.

"Because—" The girl looked toward Brother Simpkins. The mighty word in her throat would not come.

"Because she wished to make her father's life a mockery," bitterly interpreted the minister.

"No, far from that, . . . but because—" "Dear me," thought Esther, "why don't they know? How can they help seeing? It's in my brain, in my heart, branded in flaming letters, 'Love!' I should think people who meet me in the street would read it."

"Oh, Esther," the mother exclaimed, her face aglow, "it's because you desired to pray for Harry Clancy."

"I have prayed for him," the girl admitted.

"Now, you see, Brother Simpkins," went on Mrs. Damon, her voice mellow with love, "how mistaken you all were. Esther only wanted to pray for the young man. I took her to the tavern myself to labor for those lost souls. Esther wished to have the glory of converting a Catholic before she goes as a missionary. Brother, you must tell your wife not to misjudge Esther. As for her love of laces and perfumery, the poor child inherited that from me. I was full of vanity and folly and very proud. I didn't like to be a Methodist. I thought they were queer people. I went to a dance once and danced

all night in a pink silk dress. I recall how hard it was to give up my tucks, ruffles, and curls to Jesus. I couldn't part with a black silk shawl. The Lord would say to me the first thing in the morning, 'Prudence, are you going to give up the black silk shawl to-day?' I couldn't until He made it easy for me." She took her daughter's hand. "You'll put all these baubles from you, won't you, dear child?"

The girl hesitated. Then, piece by piece, she laid the beautiful beloved lies upon the table, seeming to sunder herself from living parts of her being.

"That's a good Esther," approved the mother, "and you'll not walk with that young Mr. Clancy any more in the streets, my dear. You must not be misunderstood."

"I'll not walk with him in the streets," promised the girl.

"That's right. We'll go together to the tavern to pray for him." Mrs. Damon turned with pride to her husband and Brother Simpkins. "You see, I understand Esther because she's so much like me. She's scarcely her father's daughter at all."

Indeed, it was the mother's deep fervor which had intensified the daughter's nature, colored it until it became a rallying point of fancy and stirred the imagination. But Esther was more than her mother. She was a bold, free drawing of her father, from whom came her vigor and strength. "Our daughter is not to work for the infidel any longer," Mrs. Damon gently assured them. "But Mr. Orme seems a kind, well-meaning man. He sent me

some flowers the other day by Carter. I can make him understand."

Esther was now prepared for any extreme cruelty. Making a queer, wry face she said, "Very well. Take everything." She drew several bank-notes from her pocket. "I earned these this summer weaving carpet. I intended to put them toward my college expenses."

The currency was the focus of six startled, aged eyes. Mrs. Damon, looking from one to the other, dominated the moment with her question: "What shall we do with the money, Hezekiah? Brother Simpkins, what do you think? Shall we give it to the missionary fund or return it to Mr. Orme?"

Brother Simpkins surrendered his judicial authority to the Elder who decided, "The money must go back to the infidel. Sweet waters cannot come from a corrupted fountain."

"You always know best, Hezekiah," agreed Mrs. Damon, "and these furbelows of the world"—the old lady glanced at the pathetic little laces and ribbons lying on the table—"what shall we do with them?"

"They will only be testimony against whoever wears them," said the minister sternly. "Throw the fripperies into the fire." Elder Damon took up the silken lace trifles as if he were strangling snakes and swept all into the stove. "Let us fast to-night," he said on his return. "Let us kneel right here and pray for Esther." He seized his daughter's wrist as if not entirely unconvinced that he was touching

the hand of a witch. "And you, Esther, pray for yourself," he warned. "Pray for the casting out of the devils. These depart from you only by faith. Pray for your life."

CHAPTER XIII

Alice Orme had been unable to endure the obloquy of being the only woman in Freedom not dwelling under the same roof with the man whose name she bore. Robert soon discovered that she had returned not to him, but to her marriage certificate. This was as he desired. Their union had been a physiological, never an intellectual nor a spiritual fact. He could not have endured make-believe affection. But, fearing lest he should be unkind to her, he gave Alice elaborate courtesy. Though they lived under the same roof, they were separated by mountain ranges of thought.

On the evening following the revelations in the Damon household Orme was supping with the workmen in the living-room. Alice was seated on the porch. She refused to break bread with those not of her tier of life, and always ate before the others. When she saw Mrs. Damon and Esther at the gate she fled to call Robert. To Alice, Mrs. Damon was a joke.

Robert left his companions and immediately went forward to greet the visitors. In a swift approving glance he observed that Esther had returned to her former simplicity of dress. As Mrs. Damon saw Robert, still young even with his graying hair, overflowing with energy and enthusiasm, she held

out her hands and exclaimed, "Why, Mr. Orme, you've turned back the clock ten years."

Esther, endeavoring to delay the inevitable return of the money, made haste to begin, "Mr. Orme, won't you show mother the house and workshop? I want her to see what you have done."

Robert led his guests through the roomy workshop with its wide windows and pleasing exterior, and explained the various stages of manufacturing furniture. With such applausive grace did Mrs. Damon comment on all she saw that Esther gathered hope. Perhaps her mother would allow her to remain.

When they came back to the garden Mrs. Damon stopped to look at the flowers and congratulated Orme on choosing this site for his home. They went into the cabin from which the workmen were coming out and Mrs. Damon said, "These log houses are so nice, Mr. Orme. I lived in one when I was a little girl. This takes me back to it."

Each moment seemed an argument for Esther. She explained to her mother. "People come here from Buffalo just to see Mr. Orme's factory. They all say this is going to be a big institution. Mr. Orme gives the men the freedom of the house, and they don't care to go to the tavern any more."

Mrs. Damon walked straight to the fireplace, where she saw on the mantel the little picture she had given Orme. "Do you really like this?" she asked, taking up her daughter's work.

"It's very interesting," Robert answered, somewhat confused.

"Why, my picture!" Esther exclaimed. "I didn't know you had one." The door to Alice's room closed with a slam.

"Mrs. Damon gave it to me the day I was at your house," said Orme to Esther. "I like it very much."

"They are only bits of colored paper," apologized Esther. "I wish I had oils to paint with. I do see pictures."

"I know you do," Robert answered, and then said to Mrs. Damon. "Really your daughter has great talent for anything she can do with color. She dyes remarkably well. Aunty Brewster is delighted with her."

"Yes, yes, she has talent," sighed Mrs. Damon, "and all is very pleasant here. I am not surprised she was happy working for you."

Robert had an almost feminine sense for shades of inflection. He immediately seized her slight insistence on the word "was." He looked from mother to daughter. Esther's countenance entreating him to intercede for her disclosed the object of their visit. "I hope she is still working with us, Mrs. Damon. You surely have no objection?"

The mother's smile was very lovely as she answered, "You have accomplished much and I am glad,"—unkindness ever faltered on her lips—"I am afraid it wasn't done in His name, my friend. After long prayer my husband and I have decided that our daughter must not be where He is not."

"Please, Mrs. Damon, don't insist on that.

Esther is an excellent weaver, and I really need her. Consider her own future. She's very anxious to go to college. In another year she'll be ready. By working here during her vacation she can take her degree at Mount Holyoke."

Esther's eyes followed those of her advocate. Her lips almost moved with his. But the plea broke in vain over Mrs. Damon. When the older woman spoke her mild brown eyes reflected generations which had lived for the spirit. "No, worldly wisdom will avail Esther nothing. Satan is always lurking in our paths. With the money she earned here Satan tempted her to bedeck herself with finery. Our brethren very rightly made a protest; but all will be forgiven Esther if she gives back the money. We came to return it."

None of the revolt testified to by Esther's countenance sounded on her lips when at the instance of her mother she handed the bank-notes to Orme. In a struggle for self-mastery she went down the path and stood by a rose-bush, her eyes fixed on the lake below the hill. Burning always in her brain were memories of those scattered, magical meetings with Harry Clancy. There was some rapture and ecstasy in life after all. Her great desire for education might be crushed by that maker of destinies, her mother. Her years of hopes and dreams might come to nothing. Going to college would have involved separation from Harry. Now they should see each other often. Perhaps loving him would be better than going to Mount Holyoke.

So ran her thoughts as, unconscious of what she was doing, she tore the roses on the bush to pieces and dropped the petals on the ground.

Orme, in deep sympathy for Esther, started toward her; then he hesitated. Her mother was looking at him. "I can't keep your daughter's money, Mrs. Damon," he said. "After all the work she has done, it is too horrible to take it. Don't insist. She is greatly distressed."

"Of course the poor child finds it hard, Mr. Orme. The tempter doesn't make things easy. God will show her the way to give up this desire. One lives only as one renounces. Jesus' life was renunciation."

Robert felt the need of plain speaking. Yet how could he speak plainly to this dear, unsophisticated old lady who knew so much about Jesus and so little about her daughter. "I don't like to meddle in your family affairs," he began awkwardly, "but I can't feel you're acting for the best. I realize I'm very remote from you and you'll find it hard to accept my judgment. Yet it isn't always the bush bearing the rose that understands it, is it? I've talked with Esther a good deal and studied her very closely—she's a person one does notice—and her whole heart is centred on Mount Holyoke. I've an idea—I hope you'll pardon me for expressing it—that you ought to be very careful about thrusting her into a life she doesn't like. I shouldn't care to be answerable for it myself."

"I shall do nothing, Mr. Orme. Our dear Lord performs all."

Robert felt as if his head had suddenly been thumped against the stone wall of superstition. Agreement was impossible between the minister's wife and him. Their values were too different. But, after an interval he began again, "Does Esther want to go as a missionary, Mrs. Damon?"

"Not now, but she will."

"Are you sure?"

Alarm came into the mother's eyes. "You haven't spoken against it, Mr. Orme?"

"Never a word," he was glad he could answer, "but you know nature will have its way. Isn't it a violation of youth to send her into that hard, dangerous life in Asia? Perhaps you don't realize she is beautiful. She hungers for beauty of every kind. No one sees beauty so intensely as the beautiful, and she should have it."

"Yes, I know, I am greatly blessed in having her. I thank God every day for giving her such outward fairness. Her beauty will aid Jesus. When she speaks of heaven to the poor heathen they will find it easy to believe. I hope I don t inconvenience you, Mr. Orme, by taking her away, but Esther is all I have. I have consecrated her to God. If ever you meet," she entreated pathetically, "I may rely upon you to say nothing to keep her from Him."

Orme was helpless in the presence of her faith. "Of course! Of course!" he answered.

"Thank you, my friend,' Mrs. Damon said, shaking his hand. "I do wish you were one of His disciples. What a Christian you would be!"

Then she subjoined in almost a whisper, "This evening I have wondered if you hadn't the spirit of the Master without realizing it."

"My dear lady," Robert replied with a discouraged smile, "you are so filled with it yourself that you see it everywhere."

"Oh, no, Carter tells me of you. He prays for you. Carter is one of my boys, you know. Won't you come to church sometime? This hill is too much for my miserable old body or I should have been often to see you. I am so glad," she added, her eyes suffused, "that you keep away from the tavern. I couldn't be happier if you were my own son. God will bless you."

On the way to the gate whither Orme escorted Mrs. Damon, she met Carter, with whom she shook hands. "Praise the Lord, Brother Carter," she said.

As Robert looked at Esther's disconsolate eyes it came over him that she saw the air, the great heights, the wide distances of youth, the sun only as something in which she had no share save through the bars of her prison. He made one more effort to save her. "Mrs. Damon," he called. She paused. "I hope you understand the spirit in which I make the suggestion. I have found a way for Esther to go to college without working for me."

The look of gratitude that came into the girl's eyes as he spoke remained with him always. "You have that Wesley portrait at your house. If you sell it you'll get enough for her college expenses."

Orme now knew how Mrs. Damon stared at blasphemers. "Sell Wesley's portrait!"

"Yes, I should be very glad if you would."

"Why, Mr. Orme," she gasped, "I thought you gave it me because it was too precious to be sold because you wanted some one to own the picture who would hold it sacred."

"That is true," he replied, "but if Esther——"

"And now you would have me take money for it?" she interrupted in a crying tone. "*Money*"! "Come away, Esther!" she urged in terror, as if Orme had suggested that she sell her God. Esther took her mother's arm in the manner of one whose resistance was broken. In descending the hill, she steadied the body of the older woman to keep her from stumbling. The eyes of Mrs. Damon were dim.

Orme watched the women disappear. Then he went slowly toward the house. He paused before the June rose leaves scattered on the grass by Esther Damon's rebellious fingers. He threw himself face downward upon the ground and breathed the perfume of the blossoms. Thus he lay, unmindful of all else until he heard the voice of Alice, who was standing over him.

"For Heaven's sake, Robert, how much longer are you going to lie there? The dew is falling. You'll catch cold."

BOOK THREE

AS YE SOW

How shall men feel when the last day begins?
Shall they affrighted stand in presence of their sins?
Or shall their struggles and the good they sought
Deny the shames their wrath and folly wrought?
And shall they see, each one in all the others,
The self-same love for truth that made them brothers?
And shall they find their souls at length
Judged, not by weakness, but by their strength?

—JOHN D. BARRY.

CHAPTER XIV

If this were an old-fashioned story to-day the birds would have been voiceless, the wind would have moaned, the sky glowered, the sun turned its face away. In reality, the birds were singing their gayest farewell song. The season was smiling its sweetest farewell smile. It was a golden Indian summer afternoon in a forest carpeted with golden leaves.

Harry Clancy emerged from the wood, walked along the edge of the lake; threw pebbles across the surface of the lazy water; aimlessly whittled sticks with his knife and cast them aside; glanced at his watch; impatiently retreated into the narrow glade on his right and here continued the vigil. He no longer appeared with Esther in the streets of Freedom. He waited for her in the forest. Seating himself on an ivy-covered fallen log, he again took note of the hour. Then he ventured to the edge of the wood and waved his hand. Esther was running at full speed down the road through the orchards where men were preparing for market the recently harvested fruit. As she made toward Clancy, her quaint, Methodist head-gear fell back from her face. She quickly seized her hat, crushed it under her arm, and avoiding the wagon track, tore her way through crackling brush to him.

"Oh, Harry, isn't it dreadful? I'm an hour late." She did not observe that this was less a calamity to him than to her. "Sister Simpkins was ill and I had to read to her. Otherwise I couldn't have come at all. She made me lose an hour of you on this last day."

Of admirable manly height, filled with the grace and spirit of youth, in her eyes Clancy looked like the hero of a romance as he turned toward her and quickly asked, "Why, what do you mean, Esther? This isn't the last day."

"Not the last day!" she returned, smoothing his brown hair which was long and had been trained to fall picturesquely over his forehead. "It's the last day for a month. That is forever in Freedom."

He passed his arm round her waist. As they walked toward a seat he said soothingly, "Freedom is a backwoods place. I couldn't live if I didn't get away from it every little while." Then he looked at her anxiously and added, "You mustn't think so much about this short separation. I'll be back before you know it."

"You don't understand, Harry," she whispered, quickly raising her pale face. "If only I could go away from Freedom—now. You said I could."

"I wish you could."

"Perhaps I oughtn't to say it," she went on, her throat contracting before her very words, "but wouldn't it be lovely if I could go to New York with you?" She left pride behind her and continued rapidly. "We could be married somewhere," she

said, aware of the alarm in his blue, girlishly-lashed eyes. "Do take me with you, Harry. It seems to me we can't breathe without each other. Think of being all alone together for days, weeks, months . . . always together. Wouldn't the world simply stand still if we should separate for a second?"

"We can't be married now, Esther," he answered nervously. The girl was at an age when all spoken words are true, but his tone told her that a gust of new wind was blowing, a wind she had never encountered. "Women are funny," he continued. "They're all so sentimental. They have marriage on the brain."

She withdrew from his embrace. "Why, Harry!" After an unhappy interval she went on, "Why should what I said seem so curious to you? You always talked about marriage just as they do in books. You know you did. It was beautiful." Her countenance became suddenly strange. A look of rising tears was in her eyes. Holding herself quite erect she said: "You may call me sentimental if you wish, Harry. If you mean by it that I love you, it's true enough. But I haven't marriage on the brain. I want no one but you. You've said ever so long you loved me and wanted no one but me."

"Of course I do, Esther," he answered, touching her hand, "but Father O'Darrell made such a fuss about it. My folks were worse. Do you think any minister in Freedom would marry a Catholic and Protestant? Would your father? And if we

were married, would you live down at the Ivy Green on money made from whiskey?"

His question seemed to bruise and bury her; but she found a way out of the dilemma. "Harry, we don't need to live at the Ivy Green. We can earn a living some other way. I don't mind what we do."

"I'm different," he answered with a superior smile. "I've got to have good clothes and travel. I can't give things up."

"Don't talk like that, Harry," she pleaded, her voice freighted with fear. "If I didn't know you, I'd say you were selfish." Now she saw in which way the new wind was sweeping her. Its course lay toward bitter doubt, her first doubt of friendship, of love—all concentrated in Clancy. When she slowly spoke it was as if a malevolent power were requiring her to liquidate a debt long overdue. Her words were the first payment. "Harry," she said, clutching his shoulders, "there is nothing I can't do. I'll work for you so hard. I'll never cost you anything. You oughtn't to want money that comes from such unhappiness and sin as the tavern money does. Try to earn a living in some other way. You can have all you make for yourself. I don't need clothes. I never had any; so I shan't miss them. All I ask is to be near you and hear you say once in a while that you love me."

"Oh, don't worry, Esther," he laughingly replied as he kissed her, "you're a very pretty girl. Lots of fellows will want to marry you."

His engaging Celtic eyes were bent on her in a smile. His good looks were never so manifest as now when, gazing at him to gather the implication of his words, she saw the light sifting through the trees turn his shaggy, sylvan head to gold. She pressed her hands hard against her forehead and asked, "Do you think any nice girl would ever let *two* men kiss her?" His beautifully white teeth glittered in a smile. "What is there funny about that, Harry? Surely no nice man would ever kiss more than the girl he loved. You wouldn't, would you, Harry?" He laughed without restraint while she stared. It was not the man she had known at whom she stared and wondered. With uncertain hands the girl endeavored to put on her gray bonnet; but her fingers would not respond to her will. The trees seemed to go round and round. Finally she gathered up her fragile strands of courage. She rose immediately, to be followed by Clancy.

"Now don't, Esther," he said, drawing her face back to his. "I didn't mean to make you feel bad. What you said did sound funny, but that's the sweet thing about you: you don't know. I want to be awfully kind to you."

Esther shook her shoulders, detaching herself from his embrace. "Don't mind me. Don't try to be kind to me." Her fingers nervously endeavored to tie the knot at her chin. "Laugh at me all you wish. I suppose there are lots of horrid things I don't know. You needn't talk to me as if I were a nuisance, running after you and begging you to marry me . . .

you begged. I'm not looking for you or any one else to marry me." She broke off abruptly and, after a brief collapse into tears, she went on, "Why did you ever mention marriage? Why couldn't you leave me alone, Harry? What am I? You told me I was beautiful . . . I'm not . . . I'm ugly and ignorant. I'm nothing to conquer."

"Do stop, Esther," he said, seizing one of her fluttering hands. "I didn't mean a word. It was a joke. Don't take on so. I wouldn't have you any different for the world. I can't bear to see you blue. Of course I love you."

But once having found the touchstone of truth Esther could not again accept falsehood. "Don't come near me. Don't say these things. Your voice hasn't the sound it used to have. It lost that some time ago. No matter what you say, you haven't the right tone. I know you don't love me because I care so much for you that I feel every little change in your voice. I couldn't laugh at you, nor say unkind things to you. You can . . . I know what that means. I'll never mention marriage again. . . . You don't want me. I'm going home. You may have the entire afternoon to get ready for your trip to New York."

She walked ahead of him through the narrow path made by their feet during the past months. But he hastened to overtake her. "Don't behave that way, Esther. Be a good girl. You're always so nice. Don't be cross just the last minute. If you keep on you'll spoil my trip . . . that isn't like

you. Let's have a swim together and forget this." He was at her side, and again placing his hands upon her shoulders, with an old, familiar gesture he drew her to him.

She resisted; then seemed to yield to his spell. "Yes, Harry . . . we'll swim together for the last time."

There was on his part a superabundance of belated interest, kindness, and affection as he returned, "Not the last time, Esther. We're going to have lots of swims. I'll give you a long start and we'll race. You're the only woman I ever saw who could really swim."

"It will be the last time this year. When you come back it will be cold. Then winter will come. Who can tell what the spring will be?"

While struggling with her forebodings she rested her head on his breast. For some minutes only the hum of unseen life was in the air. "After all, Esther, if you're so anxious to get away from this place—and I don't blame you—why don't you go as a missionary? It will be seeing something of the world. Anything is better than Freedom. Naturally it would be awful to me, but you were brought up that way. It mightn't be so bad for you."

She raised her head as though she had much, everything, to say, but she was voiceless. Then she made an odd clutching gesture and went onward as before. They separated at the bath houses which were in a thick grove of willows bordering the lake. Esther was dressed for the swim sooner than Harry.

In a long-sleeved cumbrous black garment, dictated by the decorous decree of the village quilting-bee, she walked up and down the lane.

When Clancy appeared she lightly took his hand and ran with him to an opening in the willows where boats were moored. As she put her foot into the water she drew back, and buried her face in her hands.

"What is it, Esther?" he asked anxiously.

She bathed her eyes for some seconds. "Come on, Esther," he urged. "You'll feel better when we're in the water."

She gave him her hand again, and they picked their way over the sharp pebbles; but presently, to avoid the hurt of them, with identity of impulse the swimmers flung themselves into the lake. Esther swam on her side, and so entirely without effort that it was as if she were at one with the water.

"When I go into the lake, Harry," she said in a brighter tone, "I forget I'm flesh and blood. I'm spirit."

Clancy circled round her with proficiency evolved during many boyhood days of truancy from school. "You're all right now, aren't you?" he asked. "Isn't it bully swimming to-day?"

"Splendid. The happiest time of my life, Harry, has been here in this lake where you taught me to swim. Let's go over to the water-lily bed. You know where we found those yellow and white lilies in the spring."

They made for the northern shore and reached

the indenture in which were the great flat leaves of lilies. "Not a flower," said Harry.

"No," she answered ruefully, "they're all gone." Both were floating when she placed her arm under his neck, and with a sudden rise of spirits, said, "Harry, let's have a nice long swim across the lake. We'll play we're going to sea. I can see the waves, can't you?"

"You're a funny girl. You've never been to sea in your life."

"I know I've never travelled except to go to camp-meetings. You've been to Asbury Park and everywhere. But I do see the sea all the same. I've read about it in books. I see all the things I read. It's like this lake, only larger, and it has a great heart which always throbs. I wish we were at sea, don't you, Harry?" She rested her head on his shoulder, using her legs as motive power.

"You'd be wanting to come back mighty quick if we really were."

"No, I shouldn't. . . . I'd go on forever and ever like this. The sea must be like eternity."

"Esther, you foolish girl, do open your eyes and come along and swim."

As she looked at the gently rolling hills, the hard, blue sky, she said, "I like this part of the lake. It's so nice and deep here. They say there's no bottom. Hell is down below." She was swimming with her feet, but she was being carried on at accelerated speed by Clancy's strong, powerful strokes.

"For Heaven's sake, Esther, stop talking about

such creepy things. If we both weren't such good swimmers we might lose our nerve out here."

"You aren't afraid are you, Harry?" she asked, her eyes fixed on him. "You and I couldn't sink if we tried. What difference would it make if we did—go right down here together?"

With her words came the pressure of her lips on his. Her arms and legs were tentacles clutching him. Her body was a weight of stone carrying him down. Harry opened his eyes and saw the black flecks in the water, the darting fish, the tangled, floating weeds. He dug his nails into the back of her neck and began beating her. Esther's desperate grip relaxed. He rose to the surface, dragging her with him by her long, thick braids of hair. He trod water and held her while she choked and strangled, and until exhausted and mute, she lay on her back, her nose pinched, her eyes closed in their large, black sockets.

"I'll take you to shore," he said with protecting affection. "Float by my side so I can keep watch of you, you bad girl."

Her voice was throaty from coughing, and she said brokenly, "No, let me swim, Harry. I'm such a bother so."

For an instant he looked at her as if she were an enemy. "Lie right where you are," he commanded. "I won't trust you to swim."

"I'm very strong, Harry," she said meekly. "Let me go on ahead of you. If anything happens you can save me . . . if you think it's worth while."

Esther in the lead, and he following, they slowly made their way toward the landing. Clancy insisted that she rest at intervals by lying motionless on her back. Once on the shore, he took her in his arms, shook her playfully and said, "Now you see what comes of talking of such crazy things. If I hadn't been brought up as a fish, nothing could have saved either of us."

"I'll never do so again," she said penitently, "but I'm sorry I came back." Her teeth chattered, her body shook and shivered.

"What do you mean?" he asked, his eyes staring into hers.

"Oh, I'm such a trouble . . . that's all."

"Nonsense. Wait a minute, Esther, I'll get you some brandy." He started to fetch it. "I always take a drink after swimming."

"No, Harry, not any. Thank you."

"What cranks you Methodists are." Taking her gently by the arm he led her to the bath house and counselled, "If you won't have brandy, Esther, do hurry and get out of your clothes. You'll catch cold if you don't."

When she closed the door he leaped to his own room like a healthy, young, frisking animal. He whistled, sang, and reappeared to call, "Esther!" On receiving no response, he again cried, "Esther, Esther, are you nearly ready?" Presently he went to the door and rapped. There was silence. Then he thrust his head within the aperture and found the girl lying on the floor—a crouching, outstretched,

conquered thing in a paroxysm of shuddering. "What's the matter, Esther? Are you crying?" he anxiously asked as he entered the bath house and endeavored to lift her. "Tell me."

She looked at him with tragic, wounded eyes, like one extracting from mortal affliction its last dregs. "No, Harry."

"You're cold," he said, bending over her. "Take off those wet things. Be reasonable and let me give you some brandy."

She shook her head. "I'm not cold. You're in a hurry, Harry . . . you go home first. I'll get dressed later."

"Of course I'll wait for you, Esther. Only please be as quick as you can. I've lots of things to do before I leave."

When she emerged from the bath house a veil of imperishable sadness hung over the girl's face. She fell back against the door. Clancy frowned at her. "Esther!" he said sharply.

"Yes," she answered in a little terrified gasp.

"Esther . . . I'll bet you did it purposely. If you did, . . . it would settle everything between us."

She shook her head despairingly. "You'd like, wouldn't you, Harry, to have something settle everything? Don't look for excuses and be cross with me because I got frightened. . . . I can't stand it. . . . I didn't mean to be a nuisance. . . . I hope this hasn't spoiled your last day." She leaned against him limply. "Don't think of this horrid afternoon," she said, fingering the buttons of his coat. "I hope,

Harry, you'll be happy. You'll be so busy seeing things in New York that you won't have time to write often, but—send me just one letter."

His arms lightly clasped her waist, as from habit rather than inclination. "Of course I'll write you, Esther."

Even in the enchantment of the embrace she perceived his eagerness to be gone. When he touched her his eyes turned toward Freedom. "You're in such a hurry, Harry, you must go first." The lovers never went back to the village together. "Let me wait here."

"No, I'll not," he replied in scrutiny, as though each second condensed his suspicion into an opinion. "You'll go to town first. I'll walk behind every inch of the way. I won't have any more nonsense. I believe you did do that purposely. If you did, you're crazy. I'm afraid of you. All you Methodists are a little off."

She listened as a mother listens to the brutal utterance of a child, listened and forgave. "Don't." Esther held her cheek against his, and her every cadence was a betrayal of the helpless being he had made of her. "I won't be a nuisance again, Harry. Pretend you love me a little . . . won't you dear?"

"I love you." The avowal was like a well-learned lesson. "Why do you suddenly think I don't?"

"It isn't sudden, Harry. Don't pretend any more . . . it's too hard for you. Good-by, I'll see you go out on the stage to-morrow night. I'll be somewhere about."

His face had gone white. "No, you mustn't . . . some one might see you."

"I don't care . . . I've got beyond that . . . I'm not afraid any more." Then with a sudden accession of strength she added, "This is good-by if you wish it." As she kissed him for the last time her life seemed to go out in that kiss. "Good-by," she repeated, and gasped, "this is hard to bear." Then she ran from his arms like a wild woman through the elderberry bushes. When she arrived at the end of the lane which was a fork of the townward road, she looked back with a dim smile and made a melancholy gesture of leave-taking.

CHAPTER XV

Lucy Yates was the young person of high privilege in Freedom. The Ormes, Mrs. Brewster, the Damons—abysmal as was the difference between them—united in indulgence for the daughter of the village physician. Since Orme's bankruptcy, Dr. Yates had become the first citizen of the town. Like a little butterfly Lucy hummed about the streets from morning till night, overturning the conventions of the place, improvising her own rules of conduct. From childhood Esther and she had had a romantic friendship. Each complemented the other. Esther admired Lucy's grace, her unrestraint, her prettiness, her worldliness—Lucy was almost like a city girl. Lucy adored Esther for her regal beauty, her superiority in the class-room, her dignity of character.

The evening following Esther's separation from Harry, while Mrs. Damon and her daughter were at supper, Lucy fluttered into the parsonage. Elder Damon was preaching at Attica, and Mrs. Damon and Esther were alone. Lucy's appearance at the minister's home intensified Mrs. Damon's misgivings about allowing Esther to associate with the unrighteous. With the girl's presence the sitting-room, perfumed with sanctity and stored with holy traditions, seemed to suffer an invasion of the world itself.

The minister's wife could credit the disquieting rumor that at the last Baptist donation party there had been dancing, with Lucy leading the profane pastime. But Mrs. Damon was genuinely fond of the girl, and was soon cajoled into allowing Esther to go for a walk.

No sooner were the friends out of the house than Lucy seized Esther's arm. "Your mother said you could be gone an hour. That means two. Let's go to the Catholic church—it will be such fun."

Esther's eyes rested on the little Catholic house of worship. To the daughter of a Methodist preacher, nurtured as she had been on absurd New England traditions concerning the older faith, this was a daring suggestion. That cross standing out so clearly on the roof of the church was for her a symbol not of the crucifixion of the Son of Man, but of superstition, idolatry, and persecution. "Why . . . I was never in a Catholic church in my life."

"I've been three times," boasted Lucy. "It was a lark. We rolled marbles right up against the pulpit, and laughed till Father O'Darrell ordered us out; but we didn't go."

It was true, adventurous young Protestants in Freedom sometimes attended the Catholic service. They went as to a menagerie or as to a Chinese joss-house—guided by curiosity for strange incense, mysterious pictures, and weird rites. Lucy's words revealed to Esther a latent tenderness in her heart for the mother church. After all, it was Harry's place of devotion. He had been reared in the Catholic faith.

"I shouldn't like to be rude," Esther answered. "I should be angry if the Catholics caused a disturbance in our meeting-house. But I'd love to see what the Catholic church is like. Is there service to-night?"

"Something is going on. I saw the light as I came along," replied Lucy, quickening her pace.

The pink wainscoted walls of the primitive little church entered by the two girls were hung with small chromos marking the stations of the Cross. The Star of Bethlehem was of crudely colored glass; but the altars were smothered with flowers. To Esther's inexperienced eyes it was as if she were in a magnificent, mysterious, dim-lighted, tapestry-hung temple where an unknown god was worshipped. The church was half filled with a kneeling congregation. Father O'Darrell, robed in white, was on his knees, saying something in Latin.

Esther heard the click of rosaries, the whispers of prayers. Her first impulse was to kneel in this church of Harry's boyhood. If only he were there with the others! Her love now expressed itself in a desire to yield to him her own true faith, born of centuries of suffering and sacrifice. In deep yearning for an exalted moment, she thought how splendid it would be here on her knees at his side to give as a supreme offering her soul to his faith. What joy there would be in such self-giving. She checked herself. This was idolatry. She could not fraternize with the spirit of the Catholic church. Hers was the simple religion of the tent-maker, the carpenter. Almost blinded by the blur of flowers and candle-

lights she sank into the seat by Lucy, breathless to see what would happen. At intervals she caught a word of Father O'Darrell's Latin prayer.

The worshippers resumed their places in the pews. Covert glances were cast in the direction of the two Protestant girls. Esther looked straight before her at Father O'Darrell, and at the young man and woman standing before him. Esther knew Harry's back, his handsome, shaggy head. He had not gone to New York the evening before. Why was he at the side of the girl in white? In the stunning force of the blow at first she gathered no meaning from what she saw. Father O'Darrell impressively began a service in English. Wild thoughts whirled through Esther's brain. Lucy seized her hand and whispering, "Why, it's a wedding!" she snuggled up to Esther and took her arm. "Aren't you glad you came?" Esther's body sagged. Lucy peered forward. "It's Harry Clancy and that girl at the Ivy Green. Isn't it funny to think we're at their wedding?"

Esther could not look at the altar. "I, Harry Clancy—" Who was the man she had known? Were those vows she heard? Was that a ring being blessed? Could the world be real? Who was she? What was she but a burning, bursting heart? Her eyes turned to the altar on the left, above which was the innocent, blue-robed figure of a maiden, her bare shoulders covered with flowing hair, on her head a diadem of gold. At her feet burned rows of candles. For her lilies gave their lives in per-

fumed death. That great mother was offering to the world her son. Esther could not take her eyes from the sweet-faced Virgin. She wished to fling herself before the figure and sob.

Voices at the altar ceased. The organ burst out in triumphant joy. Harry and his wife tried to hasten away; but with shouts and laughter their friends hurled at them rice and slippers. Esther gazed hard at the mother over the altar holding her son in her arms. The girl hoped Harry would not see her; but so closely related to him was she that she knew when he started at sight of her.

"Wasn't it pretty?" chattered Lucy. "I want a dress made like the one Harry's wife wore. I'd like to be married in church with candles and flowers. Wouldn't——" Feeling Esther's chilled hand, she asked quickly, "What is the matter, dear?"

"I want to go home . . . now. . . . I don't feel well."

"That's too bad, darling," said Lucy, as they followed the gay party out of the church.

Sounds of gayety from the merrymakers greeted the ears of Esther and Lucy as the girls went toward the parsonage. For the first time in her life Esther leaned heavily on Lucy. Her knees gave at every step. She wished to open her heart to her friend. She turned to do so, but she feared to frighten the little sunshine girl. Lucy was never so inexpressibly dear to Esther as this evening. Perhaps this was the last time they would ever walk together under the great maple and elm trees. In saying good-night,

Esther kissed Lucy many times. "Do you love me?"

"You're my sister, Esther. You're everything," Lucy answered, glad as always to look up to Esther.

"Will you love me always?"

"Always."

"No, you won't," Esther burst out violently. "No one does."

"Why, Esther, you are strange to-night. Every one loves you. I wish I were half as perfect. When I get married I want you to be my bridesmaid and I'll be yours. I'm going to call my first daughter Esther."

"You won't, Lucy. I'm bad."

Lucy kissed her. "Oh, you saint. Mrs. Damon always calls herself bad, too. Good-night, dearest. Cheer up."

"Good-night, dear." As Lucy ran down the street Esther fancied her friend was fleeing from her.

Esther was glad to be alone so that her great, splashing tears might fall unrestrained. She could not go into the house. Leaning wearily against a tree, she tasted the bitter pangs of disastrous love. Her striking out for liberty and wider experience, her pity for Harry, his bringing romance into her gray life had brought her thus to her father's house. Now her childhood with its discipline, its austerities, its rigors, returned to her as one long summer day of happiness. If only she could go back and bow her head before her parents' authority. How easy it would be in comparison with what she must endure.

She did not know which way to go. She seemed bewildered, lost. She started toward the house, but she felt a weight on her head and shoulders. She sank to the steps of the porch, but she wept no more. Tears were for those who had hope; for her there was none.

Again and again she went over the past, erasing it, until her mother called, "Daughter! daughter, dear!"

Esther rose, her girlhood gone. She was a woman, with a high definite form of life. "I won't be crushed. I won't," she said, as she went into the house.

CHAPTER XVI

ESTHER was never less Esther than during the month following Clancy's marriage. She never stamped her feet, nor slammed doors, nor gave way to tempests of anger. She expressed no longing for milliners' hats instead of those queer bonnets made by her mother. Her high spirit was all gentleness and humility. Her obedience was beautiful to see. On Sunday she attended divine service with her parents, and to spare them uneasiness, she still taught her class of children. During the week, when Mrs. Damon went on pilgrimages of prayer, Esther remained at home and worked. Hitherto she had shrunk from unbeautiful household tasks. Now she plunged into them. She scrubbed the floors, she cleaned the windows, she polished the stove. When she beat the soiled linen with her fists it was as if she sought to wound her flesh.

Mrs. Damon, radiating gentle optimism, came in from the post office. Seeing the violence of the girl's efforts, she said, "Of course, Esther, you should know how to do everything. When you are a missionary service will be your life. But, dear child, you look over-tired. You seem quite altered."

"I want to work hard, mother," answered Esther, her great eyes burning as if feeding on the blood of

her white, worn face. "I want to test my strength. Perhaps some day I'll need to be a servant."

"Oh, my child," protested Mrs. Damon, "dry your hands and come into the sitting-room. I want to speak with you."

The girl was in the kitchen, bending over a steaming tub of clothes. Her gray print dress was turned in at the throat; her sleeves were rolled high above the elbows, revealing creamy, soft arms. Esther had worked until drops of perspiration stood on her brow. She divested herself of her apron, closed the collar of her dress, let down the sleeves, fastened the cuffs, went into the room and sat before her mother, whose trembling hands held an envelope. Esther looked at the paper in dumb, increasing alarm. It did not make her less anxious that Mrs. Damon was smiling as if she had just received a rich, new happiness. "It has come at last, Esther, sooner than I expected."

"What has come?" Esther's bewilderment was unmistakable.

"The call, child, direct from the Board of Missions for you to go to China. Of course the separation will be hard for your father and me, but you've been reared for missionary labor. We'll keep our eyes fixed on the covenant when He spared your life. What a big, fine, strong woman you will be for the work of the Lord."

"For the work of the Lord!" Mother and daughter seemed no longer to breathe the same air.

"Yes, for our dear Saviour," Mrs. Damon went

on beatifically. "Perhaps at first it will be hard for one so young as you. But think of those brave young followers of John Wesley. They left luxury in England to wander through the American wilderness. They preached in tents and cabins. They forded rivers and almost died in swamps. Often they slept under the stars with a saddle for a pillow and an overcoat for a bed. Your grandfather Damon was one of them."

Esther withheld her face from her mother. "Jesus doesn't want me."

"How can you say such a thing, daughter?"

"No," insisted the girl, her eyes fixed on the chart of prayers hanging on the wall, "the Lord hasn't the least concern for me."

Esther seemed to surround herself by a wall not to be penetrated by her mother. Mrs. Damon's dim eyes endeavored to pierce it; but it loomed there, forbidding and chill, a structure of mystery. The mother seized Esther's hands and earnestly questioned, "What has come over you, my child? Why do you speak so strangely? Have you lost your vision of purpose? It can't be that all your father's teaching is of no avail."

Esther's ravaged face confronted her mother. "God has forgotten me. If He had one thought for me, He wouldn't allow me to live."

The mother's hand smoothed the head of her daughter as if she were a child. "Not let you live, dear? Why, you are of His chosen ones. You speak as if you didn't love God."

The girl averted her glance. She desired not to behold the anguish her words would cause. Her chair was moved to the opposite side of the table before she responded, "How can I love God? What has He done for me?"

"Everything, my dear. He saved your life. He made you a joy to your parents. Now you're to carry light to thousands awaiting you."

With every second, difficulty of speech increased for the girl. Her entire body seemed to contract; but suddenly she turned to her mother as if resolute never again to utter a word not dictated by truth. "Light, mother. I can't do what you expect. I need help more than any heathen."

The poor woman seemed to feel that in this moment the earth shifted, leaving her suspended in the air; but she finally answered, "Do you realize what you are saying, Esther—that you are deaf to the summons of our Master?" She paused before the overwhelming image. "Aren't you afraid, daughter, God will withdraw His spirit from you?"

"I have no spirit," the girl returned in slow desperation. "I've only a miserable, suffering body."

Mrs. Damon looked at her daughter. Her gentle glance brushed lightly past base and evil things. "How can you so grieve me, dear? I don't understand the ways of the children of the Lord."

Esther leaned far over the table, her rigid hands clasped. "That's true. You don't understand. You never understood me . . . poor, dear mother."

The girl's lips trembled; her head sank to the table; her force seemed spent, as she added with smothered voice, "I wasn't worth understanding. . . . I wasn't worth bringing into the world." With violence she flung out her arms in the piteous, stammering question, "Why was I ever born?"

Mrs. Damon rose, drew her chair close to that of her daughter, and said softly, "You blessed girl." But Esther shrank from this unmerited tenderness as if touched by fire. "You've worked too hard. You shouldn't tire yourself so."

The girl did not look up. She sat dumb with agony, her head swaying back and forth. "No, no! . . . I'm not tired. My conscience is scorching me . . . that's all."

At these words Mrs. Damon lost her way in a thicket of conjecture. "Of course, child, we are all of unseemly heart . . . but there are no grave transgressions in your sweet, pure, young life."

Esther raised her head, determined no longer to evade danger. Still she hesitated, heart-broken before the knowledge of the blow she was striking: "My life isn't sweet . . . nor pure. My soul is a tangle of sin. I'm wicked, mother . . . the wickedest woman you ever heard of."

A sick, scared look came into the eyes of Mrs. Damon. "Darling daughter, I felt just that way when I had my silk shawl with fringe. Neither your father nor I considered the ribbons and lace very serious, for, child, I never told you before—but perhaps you've heard it from others—you're

very beautiful. It's natural for you to like luxury. Don't torture yourself over those furbelows."

These words sounded the depths of despair in the girl's soul. Wrath and anger could not have hurt as did her mother's trembling anxiety to avert fate. But she must speak and at once. "Mother, dearest," she said, "you're not afraid to listen to what I have to tell?"

What had this good woman who lived for faith and love of God to fear? "No, I'm not afraid, Esther." Her eyes were a plea for enlightenment. Her voice craved for mercy.

"You should be," the girl went on, pressing her teeth against her hands to restrain the sobs. She placed a sustaining arm round her mother. "Forgive me, dear . . . but how did you who were so good come to be the mother of one so bad as I? Don't you understand?" The mother's eyes pressed toward her. They could not pierce the veil hanging before them. "Don't you understand? No, how can you? You never saw sin nor evil. Look at me. Look at me! See how I'm changed."

"My child, you have altered," was the alarmed answer.

Esther rose and gave her mother a long, charged gaze. "Look at me again—through and through. I'm all blackness. Make no mistake."

Mrs. Damon glanced at her daughter's bloodless hands, at her pale, hunted countenance. For a brief, unhappy moment the terrible truth caught and held her. "No, dear," she said.

"Yes, yes," Esther went on like an executioner, unable longer to endure the anguish of the victim whose head lay bleeding on the block. "Yes, that was it. You thought it. Look at me again. If I weren't your daughter you'd be down on your knees praying for me. You'd know I am one of those men have slain."

The mother did not loudly lament, nor burst into tears; but her changed shrivelled countenance, her sunken eyes in which stood tears that did not fall, told of the pain she kept in her heart. She fixed on the girl the stare of the dying. Then Esther knew how she herself must have looked when the last light of her faith flickered out. She knew, too, she should always recall the silence, the ticking of the clock, the rattle of a passing buggy, the striped carpet, the tablet of prayers, the great Bible, the barren room, the wave in the grizzled hair, the little black bonnet, the black dress with the row of buttons, the bent head, the curved back, the rising and falling of the bosom, the lifeless hands that did not respond to her touch. All her days the poor woman had sought for sinners. This is how it was when she found one on her own hearthstone.

"Mother!" Esther struggled with words; she seemed to have no right to speak. "You shouldn't have tried to alter the will of God when I was a child. Why didn't you let me die with the others? I've given you only sorrow."

The clock ticked on noisily. The mother did not lift her head. The trembling, speechless girl saw the

gentle lips move in soundless invocation. Presently Mrs. Damon caressed Esther's long plaits of hair. Then she looked at her daughter, and said, "It isn't I who must suffer most. It's you, dear child . . . oh, my baby! The other day you were my baby . . . my little baby!" She took her daughter in her arms, and the beauty of what passed between them in their silence and in their tears was never to end. "But who, Esther," Mrs. Damon began; then she hesitated as if shrinking from the long train of inquiry the question involved, "who is there so base?"

Esther's head rested on her mother's knee, and the older woman, receiving no answer, repeated the question. The daughter was still silent. "Esther!" The lips of the girl could not be unlocked. Never in the sad eyes of Mrs. Damon was there so rich a consciousness of the crucifixion as when she asked, "Who is *he*?"

Esther turned away her head. She seated herself on a low wooden stool and twisted her fingers. "Why ask, dear mother?"

"Don't you understand it must be known?"

"Why?" It was one thing to give herself over to her mother. It was quite another to give her lover.

Mrs. Damon journeyed from one darkness into another darkness even more profound. She seemed to hold out her hands like the blind. "When you become his wife, Esther."

"I can't . . . mother."

"What do you mean, child? You can't with honor belong to any other man."

"I don't wish to be married at all."

"Esther, you wish to be an honest woman. You can only be that as the wife of this man."

"Mother, he doesn't want me."

The poor woman was laid low as the dust. "Surely there is no one who will refuse to right such a wrong."

"I am sorry always to grieve you, mother, . . . but I wouldn't marry him."

Mrs. Damon raised her hands and moaned. "Years ago I used to look at you and wonder if you could be my daughter. Again I ask, can you be my daughter?"

"I know, poor dearest . . . all the reproaches and humiliation this will be to you, but I am your daughter. . . . Don't make me creep and crawl and be despised by some one who doesn't want me. I can never be his wife."

Mrs. Damon seemed to shrink and wither as she looked at her child, the changeling with whom she must acquaint herself. "What, Esther, do you intend doing?"

Esther saw a form coming into the garden—the chill, stern, martial form of the Reverend Hezekiah Damon. "Father," she cried in alarm, as if finding herself caught in the whirl of two meeting currents, "Father has come home." She sprang quickly to her mother's side and entreated, "You won't tell him. Promise me . . . I can't bear that."

Before the mother could answer the door opened. The minister himself stood on the threshold. Esther

feared. Her words had peopled the parsonage with imperceptible shapes—the shapes of dishonor, shame, disgrace, ruin. They crowded against one another in the little sitting-room. The minister felt their presence. With a mortal chill he sensed their relation to his child. Esther's back was toward him—a back no longer rigid with pride, but relaxed in humility. He turned to Mrs. Damon for enlightenment.

"Why, wife, what is the matter? The house seems like desolation." The shapes blew toward him their icy breath.

"It is desolation, Hezekiah," Mrs. Damon moaned. "How can I tell you? But you are Esther's father. . . . I need your strength to endure this calamity."

"What is it, Prudence?" he asked sternly, though with sinking heart. He fixed his eyes on his daughter's back. "Has Esther been working for the infidel again?"

"If it were only that," answered Mrs. Damon. "It isn't ribbons . . ."

"Then what is it?" he insisted.

It seemed that the cry would always echo in the room, the cry of Mrs. Damon as her voice broke and she sobbed, "Esther isn't a good girl any more. . . . She has started for Hell."

CHAPTER XVII

Elder Damon thought with the cruel orthodoxy of his fathers, untempered by higher criticism. He saw Esther with their eyes. With their ears, he heard the old-new story of a woman's sin. He thundered at his daughter with their wrath and bitterness; but the girl had his own unyielding will. She would not give him the name of her lover. Then the white-haired man, more a father than a priest of God, gave way and faltered, "I wish I were in my grave!"

Esther could not remain in the room. The stairs creaked loudly as she mounted them that night in her starless grief. Words scarce felt when they dropped from her father's lips now scorched. She whose childhood had been a dream of martyrs and saints fell lifeless upon her bed. She was stirred to consciousness by a violent electric storm which shook the house like an earthquake. She wished the parsonage would burn, that she might be consumed in its ashes. Even during the storm her father and mother did not come to her. When the thunder ceased there was no sound from below save the passionate prayers of Elder Damon and his wife.

Unable longer to endure the solitude, Esther went downstairs. Her parents were on their knees in

the sitting-room, side by side. They were looking upward, wringing their hands. "Don't," she entreated, touching the shoulder of each, "don't do that." But they continued in supplication. Burying her face from the sight of their pain, she rested her head on the great Bible on the table in the centre of the room.

In the morning light the parsonage looked as if it would never recover from what it had seen. A large maple tree in front of the house had been felled by lightning. To the preacher that tree symbolized his life; to Esther it symbolized her own. The father looked at his daughter in new horror. Without his training to what depravity might she not have sunk? Mrs. Damon wondered wherein the girl's upbringing was at fault; but she had so withheld herself from gross life that Esther seemed a mystery not to be approached or solved. A little white kitten neared the sinner and crept away. Even the tablets of prayer reproached Esther. The old-fashioned Bible assumed a personality, and hurled at her its laws.

The preacher went to the church, opened the doors, and returned, while Mrs. Damon set about preparation for the morning service. Esther wondered if ever again she should enter the house of God; if the life of her family once more would be hers. The father and mother—matchless in their harmony—now rested all on their prayers that, in the humble little church, their daughter this morning might find the faith which had strayed, and at last retrace her way to salvation. Elder Damon and

his wife, Bibles and hymn-books in hand, awaited Esther. She made no motion to join them until her mother, turning to her, said solicitously, "Esther, you're coming with us, of course."

Even this stinted sign from her family that she was not, as yet, quite estranged, was for the girl a pleasure. To the evident satisfaction of her parents she hastened to fetch her hat. After all, their daughter had not entirely abandoned the holy traditions of the hearthstone. She was not in brazen rebellion before the little community of Methodists. She did not refuse to enter the house of their faith. That Esther did not as usual take up her Bible, the Bible she had carried since becoming a member of the church, was a comforting omission. In the girl's reprobate state, such contact would have been profanation of the sacred book. When with reverent bowed head she followed her parents down the board sidewalk to the church, even the sharp eyes of Sister Simpkins noted nothing unusual in the little procession.

Brother and Sister Simpkins, smiling as if in communion with the shining saints, arrested their steps to attend the arrival of their pastor's family. With solemnity, Elder Damon wrung the hand of Brother Simpkins. While Esther passed on before, and Mrs. Damon conversed with Sister Simpkins, the preacher said, "Brother, pray for me to-day. Pray for us all, especially Esther."

Brother Simpkins looked at the still, worn face of his pastor. Deeply touched by this humble appeal, he recalled that hideous day when he had seen

Esther flaunting ribbons and lace. His lips moved in anxious whisper, "Esther ain't a backslider?"

Elder Damon's pride of religion was shattered when with motion of the head, he made the admission and added, "Tell the brethren and sisters to pray for her. We need your help."

It was the call of a master to his loyal disciple. "You can rely on me, Brother Damon."

Presently the minister, his wife, and daughter, after greeting the Killits, the Hames, passed into the house of worship and took their customary seats. The sermon was preceded by a love-feast—a spontaneous expression of joy, during which the minister sat in the congregation, becoming as one of the humbler servants of the Lord. It fell to Brother Simpkins, the most devout lay Methodist in Freedom, to lead the service. He began by singing in a high, cracked voice, "Rescue the Perishing." He was joined by all save Esther, whose ark of the covenant was empty. Several sharp, smiling eyes saw Mrs. Damon offer her daughter a hymn-book and enjoin her to take part in the service. When Esther allowed the volume to rest untouched on her knee, for a queer, uncertain moment the voices wavered, but Brother Simpkins, vocalizing the refrain with redoubled stress, rescued the worship of song from interruption.

To-day Brother Simpkins was in armor. He shrank from no service to his beloved pastor. After another hymn, he rose and testified to his redemption from sin. Far back in his youth he had chewed

tobacco, smoked, and belonged to secret societies. To-day he might have been entirely lost, had he not in early manhood given himself to God. Facing the congregation he said, "Don't get led into the sins of the world. Come to Jesus while you're young. It makes life so easy. I just laugh all day. I don't care whether it rains on my wheat. I know everything will come out all right. Now, is there any young folks here who think it would be grand if us Methodists would put on more style? Is there any one who isn't quite sure he's saved? Is there any one who'd like to be prayed for?"

By this time all eyes in the church were fixed on Esther seated between her parents. Her mother touched her hand; her father's elbow pressed against her arm. To the girl it seemed that every one was looking into the chapter of her life she endeavored to keep closed. The eyes of the congregation were a great eye staring at her. "Esther, ain't you got nothing to say?" questioned Brother Simpkins, beaming indulgence. She did not raise her glance, but shook her head. She wondered if they all had read her secret.

When it became apparent that Brother Simpkins' appeal was futile, the minister, knelt and said, "Let us pray."

For the first time in public, Esther did not obey the signal. She sat with obdurate, squared shoulders. At sight of this insurrection, Esther was conscious that little Hannah Simpkins peered at her from the angles of her spectacles as if asking what

kind of a person the daughter of their pastor could be. Elder Damon proceeded like one hurt by the wounds from the cross he was carrying. He concluded with this plea: "Lead her back to Thee, oh, Christ! lead her back to Thee. Break up the heart of Esther."

Mrs. Damon, the tears standing hot in her eyes, moaned prayerfully, "Yes, break up her heart."

Even Carter in the rear of the church echoed the fervent plea, "Lord, break up her heart." There was a reverberation of "Amens." But still the girl did not stir.

At length the minister paused, took his daughter's hand, coerced her with the presence of almost the entire membership of the church. "Esther, ask Jesus to bear the burden of your sins. Don't sin against the Holy Ghost, my daughter. Mistrust your strength. Throw it away. Don't delay, or the devil, hell, death, and the fearful curse of God will overtake you."

Mrs. Damon who had only to close her eyes to feel herself surrounded by the divine presence, caressed her daughter's left hand, and exhorted, "Esther, kneel, and ask our Father to forgive. Seek eternal life."

Though the earnest band of pilgrims remained on their knees and their prayers were never so long, in the girl there was no stirring of divine impulse. She still remained an alien. Their way was not her way. Orme had thought of her that she would be intensely right or intensely wrong. To-day she was

intensely wrong, but for her it was a saving grace that she was intensely honest. One by one, the worshippers rose from their knees, the older folk with heads bowed in grief that their beloved pastor and his wife should be so afflicted.

When Brother Simpkins had begun speaking, it was with mis-measurement of the dire condition of Esther's soul. As her lost state made itself plain, over all hung and brooded calamity. With resultant gravity Brother Simpkins and Brother Hames went about their office of offering the Love-Feast of bread and water. Their boots squeaked as they passed up the main aisle. The minister partook of the divine symbol; but Esther declined the invitation. Thus with all the insolence of her flaming presence she proclaimed her disaccord with the service. Once more that great eye of the congregation covered her, now in horror. The church had never been stirred by a like storm. What must not poor Brother and Sister Damon have suffered from such a monster? These Methodists were believers who in their hearts burned unbelievers. Hidden, unused cells of their puritanical heredity recalled the witches of New England. Had such an one survived in Freedom? Could Brother Damon preach on a day like this, a day on which his own hearthstone turned against him? They all looked at the grim face.

Brother Damon was of extraordinary rectitude of character. Brother Damon was a man of oak. Against him storms might beat in vain. Brother Damon would preach. Brother Damon emerged

from his pew as if in obedience to a higher imperative; went down the aisle; mounted the little prominence called the pulpit. Brother Damon's text, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of an angry God," caused the listeners to stir in their seats.

There was something strange and unfamiliar in the minister's manner. His face was hard and bloodless as, in a tense voice, he analyzed sin. Despite his Wesleyan training there was always in his sermons the severity of the Calvinism of his more remote theological ancestry. The preacher subdivided his theme into sins against the family, society, and the Creator. He fixed the responsibility of each individual for his own transgressions. His bitterest denunciation was for the sins of the flesh, for their insidious corruption of the soul, leaving it a hideous, withered thing in the hands of an angry God. As he proceeded in his discourse he drank thirstily of a glass of water standing by the Bible. The minister's overwrought manner, his grating voice, rising in pitch, held the congregation rigid, motionless. He presented terrifying images of the punishment meted out in the final reckoning to victims of the flesh. God was a wrathful, implacable being in whose laws there were no loop-holes. God exacted an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. In one picture, more monstrous than another, he finally likened the angry, pitiless Creator unto a man holding an insect over a white-hot flame, watching it writhe and struggle to escape its fearful end until it curls up into a black cinder and falls into the fire.

With lids lowered, Esther listened to her father. She did not raise her eyes until the minister, pausing dramatically, fastened his gaze on his daughter, revealing the particular object of his condemnation. Now that great eye stared close into the eyes of the girl. Her rebellious conduct had released her father's words from all restraint. No tenderness could be expected by her who belonged to him by ties of blood. The preacher justified himself by recalling that even the Master had said His brother was he who did as He did.

"I believe that our Father did not intend us to be silenced by our vile earthly affections which make truth falter on our lips. Our children should not be loved before God. When we find in our household the wayward child which is the abomination of the Lord it is our duty to make of him an example."

Esther's lips parted in amazement; her cheeks grew livid. Mrs. Damon's mouth sagged at the corners. She seized her daughter's hand. The preacher had proscribed his own happiness. He did not scruple to inflict misery on others. Heavily disappointed in his child, he put aside parental love as a material, detachable object. "I, as your shepherd share this shame which has come upon our church. I blame myself, because I have made an idol of my affection for the disobedient, rebellious girl. I have had unknowing pride in her very fairness which brought her to sin and disgrace.

Esther's hymn-book fell with a loud noise to the

floor. Elder Damon's steely eyes gleamed in their sockets like lamps in cellars. With some of the terrible vehemence of the Master when He denounced the Pharisees as whited sepulchres and hissing serpents, the minister continued in what seemed to him the higher service: "My brethren, make no idols of clay lest they turn your lives to torment, lest the objects of your worship totter and fall. Put not your trust in your own flesh and blood lest one day you look into the face of your daughter and find her a strange woman."

Esther had withdrawn her hand from her mother's clasp. She sat tensely gripping the back of the low seat before her. At her father's last words, in a storm of fury, she rose to leave the church. The minister, recollecting her iniquity and seeing her again publicly declare herself the foe of his household, was driven to an entire loss of self-control. He thundered after his daughter words like the primal curse given the first transgressor: "Woe unto adulterers, for their offspring shall curse them."

CHAPTER XVIII

Elder Damon's violence carried him farther than he had intended. Esther's senses, straying back to equilibrium, recalled one by one his condemnatory words. Again they cracked brutally in her ears. She should always hear them. The first inhuman truth of the world had issued from her father's lips. How the horror-stricken eye of the congregation followed her. How it penetrated, probed; would have crowded its way into the hurt, into the passion of the scarlet woman's soul. They were all against her. Everything that touched her—traditions, upbringing, family, friends, church—everything near and far was against her. When her father entered the house she knew it was blood against blood. Each held the other for a foe.

In silence the minister went to the chimney-place behind the stove, and took a small book in which were enrolled the names of the church members. Hers was the last there inscribed: "Esther Damon, aged twelve, baptized in Freedom, December, 1869." She had been carried to the altar in her father's arms, his last convert in Freedom. Since that day her name had stood alone on the leaf.

Mrs. Damon, perceiving the drift of her husband's procedure, tried to stop him. Laying an entreating

hand on his, she remonstrated, "Hezekiah, you're only a servant of the Lord. Ought you decide who is bad and who is good? The church should protect those who stray."

The preacher paused, but looking like a sponsor for righteousness, he said, "My highest duty is as custodian of the honor of my church. Our own daughter is its first unworthy member." Then with resolute manner he severed the page from the book, tore the leaf into fragments, and cast them into the stove. For Esther, this act was the last degree of humiliation, the breaking of a traitor's sword.

Mrs. Damon covered her face with her hands, but only to intensify her mental vision. Presently she turned to the preacher a white, afflicted countenance. "Hezekiah, when you wrote Esther's name in the church book, Jesus wrote it in His heart. Whatever happens, her name will always be there. I shall always have hope for her."

Elder Damon shook his head doggedly. "No, wife, it's all over. I warned her. Neither you nor I can stay the hand of God." The minister frequently confused his vetoes with those of the higher power. "The sinner must suffer the consequences of sin."

For the first time, censure of her husband rose to the lips of the distressed woman. With severity she quoted: "'What do ye more than others?'" and then more gently she said, "Hezekiah, you behave like one unknowing the mercy and love of God. Christians must meet misfortunes more nobly than

others. We must show the truth of the Master not in words, but in conduct."

For a second only the minister wavered; then turning to Esther he said: "You deny Jesus. You refused His body to-day. You think you're above the Ten Commandments, but you've got to come back to them, you and this wicked world, or perish in lust."

"You think you're wounding me, father," the girl faintly protested. "You are only wounding yourself."

"Yes, Hezekiah," seconded Mrs. Damon. "Esther is right. Don't you remember what the Good Book says? 'Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down His life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.' Then how much more should we do for Esther? She is the child of our prayers. Forget our humiliation and grief. Think of what she must suffer. Let us keep her here with us and in the church."

Esther looked up in quick plea. "Yes, let me stay, father, I won't do any harm."

The preacher's face was like a rock. "No, you still cling to the deadly sweetness of the flesh. Your sin and our faith can't live in the same house. Your place is with the father of your child."

Esther suddenly rose. Her mother started toward her, but her father thrust himself between them. This act clarified the girl's thoughts. Esther looked about the home of dear associations, now a vanished enchantment. How strange that she herself had

not been the first to recognize her right to dwell here as annulled! But where could she go? Inexperienced, untravelled, she thought only of Freedom. That was her world. Bewildered by the strange aspect of life, suddenly there came to her a sharp, unmistakable perception of the way she was to follow. Her deep, strange eyes glowed with new hope. "No," she answered with quick decision, "I'll not go to one who doesn't want me, but I have friends."

"My darling child," interposed the mother, "you don't know the world. I wish you did have friends, but Dr. Yates and his family——"

"It isn't the Yates family," corrected Esther. "It's Mr. Orme."

"The infidel," exclaimed the minister.

"A stranger!" added Mrs. Damon.

"Yes," Esther returned defiantly, "I'm no relation of Mr. Orme. He doesn't believe Jesus died for him, and may be he is wicked. Perhaps that's why he doesn't mind me. He'll give me work and shelter."

Stung by the implied reproach, Elder Damon stormed, "I forbid a woman like you to criticise me or my religion. Go to the infidel. Evil is a magnet for evil."

Mrs. Damon touched her husband's arm with her knotted saffron hand. "Don't say that, Hezekiah. You're speaking hastily. Think of the others taken despite our prayers. Don't pass the same sentence on Esther."

The minister pressed his hand convulsively against his forehead. "Death would have been better than this. I don't want to touch or see her. I can't breathe the same air with her. She's a beautiful flower with a serpent in her heart."

"Don't send her blindfolded into the wilderness of the world, Hezekiah," pleaded the mother. "She will stumble and fall. I'll never give her up. I want her here with me. I want to soften the jeers of the world. I want to be with her when she needs a friend. Poor broken-winged bird! . . . I'll take care of her and her child."

To the father it seemed that a sombre ghost had stalked into the room, a ghost which would always prowl and wail about the house—the ghost of his daughter's lost, decent life. "How can you speak of such a thing, Prudence? Can you watch her alter and grow hideous? Can you see her shame multiply until there are two reproaches instead of one? I can't."

"Then that is where your faith breaks down, my husband, 'He that loveth not knoweth not God.' That is why you don't convert sinners in Freedom."

Elder Damon had long thought only on the sins of others. In his austere way of living he was unmindful that there were sins of the heart as well as sins of the flesh, and of these former were his. "It may be," he answered, "that I'm weak, Prudence. I'm only human, and I can't be accused every day by the presence of my daughter as a Magdalene. If that's weakness I confess I'm weak."

Esther was at the door, her hand on the knob. With shaken voice she spoke to her father: "I'm sinful, a disgrace to myself and you both. . . . I suppose I deserve all the blame I shall have, but, father, . . . you always preached forgiveness of sin. Our first disagreement came because you wanted me to go as a missionary. Did you intend me to sacrifice my life to teach the heathen to drive their children into the streets?"

All self-command gone, the minister cried furiously: "Don't dare argue with me. You're a fallen woman. In the Scripture, the city of Meroz lives only through the curse launched against it. You'll be recalled only through your sin."

When her husband lost himself in anger, Mrs. Damon sometimes interrupted by singing a hymn. Before he had completed his sentence the quavering voice burst out in song. The minister listened with bowed head, but his soul gave no reply. Still inexorable he said to his daughter, "You'll suffer."

"I can't suffer any more than you have made me, father," she answered. "I'm not afraid. I know what's coming—misery and shame." Then she faltered; but she was in the thrall of a strange, sacrificial ardor which made her more than herself, which inspired her to go out eagerly to her expiation. She raised her fine, white face which seemed to have strayed from an alien age into this. "I'll try to bear it . . . whatever comes."

Even after her destruction, Esther seemed stronger than he. The father looked at his daughter in a kind of awe. There was a mystery about her.

What was it? The mother, in her infinite tenderness, answered, "Esther, poor Esther. You think you're a woman, but you're only a big, proud child. You need protection more than ever. My home is always your home, dear."

It was harder for Esther to suffer the sweet mercy of her mother than the harsh injustice of her father. She swallowed and choked as she stammered, "It hurts me to see you so good, mother, but father is right . . . there is no place for me here. I'd like to stay, . . . but I can't without hurting you. You mustn't share my shame . . . or try to excuse me. I want to go away. . . . I can't endure the thought of your eyes following me. I'll work. Never attempt to see me again. . . . I'll never be the same again."

Just as on the eve of battle sometimes the highest bravery suddenly shows a fluctuation, so Esther cowered before the future. But finally she opened the door. When the hour of separation came the minister relented a little. For a moment he forgot pride of spirit and remembered his child. He saw her as she was, pale, wan, broken, yet indomitable. In softened tone he made a final peace offering: "Esther, . . . perhaps I've been too harsh. Tell me the name of that monster . . . marry the man. Give your child a name. . . . Spare me and my church this terrible disgrace, and I'll overlook what you've done. With God's help I'll forget."

Knowing her father as she did, Esther realized that words had never passed his lips costing him such pain. But still determined to shield the lover, she answered, "You call him a monster and you ask

me to marry him. . . . It hurts me as much to say it as it does you to hear it, but I can't, father. I'll live without any thought of being a wife. I'll live for myself, like a man."

The minister interpreted the girl's disjointed syllables as flagrant disobedience. He waved his arms in command. "Then go. You're unteachable. Learn for yourself. . . . I have no daughter."

When Esther's foot was on the threshold Mrs. Damon hurried toward her. "If Esther goes I go with her. You shan't send her away, Hezekiah."

Elder Damon gripped his wife's hand. "Prudence, sit down." Then he closed the door violently that no further words might pass between him and the culprit.

Elder Damon stood at the window, his eyes fixed on the recreant. Her every step seemed to be on his dull, aching heart. He was old and broken. At the end of the block Esther turned toward the four corners of the village. Then her father noted the barren trees, the leaves whirling on the grass, and that life had moved far toward winter. "That girl has the faith in herself which only the devil can have," he exclaimed, when the gray bonnet disappeared. "I believe she's possessed. Don't utter her name to me, Prudence. We must never see her again. I want never to see this house again. I want never to see Freedom again. I will abandon it. 'Whosoever shall not hear your words, depart ye out of that house or city.'"

BOOK IV

THE RESURRECTION OF A SOUL

Natheless the woman did not rise;
Lifted only her shame-red eyes,
Gazing at Jesus in helpless wise:

"Death and shame await me whether
I turn me hither or turn me thither:
Go, sayest thou; but, Master, whither?"

Did Jesus leave her lying low?
Gladly the puzzled world would know
Whither the Master bade her go.

—WILLIAM HERBERT CARRUTH.

CHAPTER XIX

ESTHER went on, sustained by consciousness of inner power in reserve. But she realized Freedom never before had borne such an aspect, nor had the autumn winds so stung her bare hands. The streets were almost deserted. Hannah Simpkins, a short, podgy, red-faced girl of her own age, was the first person she met. Hannah had been present in the morning at the church. When she saw Esther she took a quick breath, trembled, and hurried on her errand. Poor Hannah! She had suddenly grown young as Esther felt herself old. Two lads on their way to fish made a ribald remark intended for Esther's ears. They knew. She saw a conference of sunbonnets over a fence. The sunbonnets knew. Ira Wherritt, who was just leaving his store, loitered on the steps, looked at her with something which in his youth had been his rudimentary idea of a leer. He knew.

Esther stood at the Four Corners for the first time since Harry's marriage. It had taken a month for this hour to arrive; but it was here. The shades of all the stores were drawn. The windows of the Ivy Green were curtained like eyes that dared not meet her own. Harry was on the other side of those curtains. Being even thus near him registered itself in her heavy heart-beats. The lame hostler appeared

in a buggy before the tavern and waited until Harry emerged from the front door to take possession of the reins. It was some time before Clancy saw Esther. Then he lighted a cigarette, flicked a fly from his horse's head, and turned the buggy with his back toward her. That was the lover who had brought her here.

Soon there came a pink and white, fragile, fluttering girl whom Esther recognized as Stella. Husband and wife drove away together. Then Esther felt her strength crumble. Something throbbed and throbbed in her brain as on the night of the marriage; but she had no resentment, no desire to proclaim her wrong, no heated, savage jealousy—so far beyond herself had she loved. "At least," was her thought, accompanied by a sigh, "it's best everything is over." But she soon realized that all was not over. Nothing was ever over. She had merely taken a little step toward death, and even now her effort was biting its print into her countenance.

Before the pharmacy the clerk was recounting to the druggist an amusing story. Conversation was suspended as she appeared. The men looked at her quizzically, made a feint of lifting their hats. When she had passed there was laughter—the laughter of men with unclean thoughts in their minds and unclean words on their lips. They knew. She had intended to trample all this under her feet, but her strong, untried will was vanquished when she found herself a joke. Could no one see what she was undergoing?

In front of the prosperous, white residence of Ira Wherritt she saw Alice Orme. This matron passed through the gate, closed it with accusation and hastened into the house. That was what Mrs. Orme thought of her. Esther wondered how Mrs. Orme's husband would look. Would his large tolerance desert him? Soon the girl realized she was running the gantlet of a barricade of curious, vivisecting eyes concealed behind the shutters and the curtains of the houses she passed. All those eyes knew. There was naught save her disgrace and her denunciation in the air. She became frightened; she wished to hide. All the world was sneering her back to her home. But there was the real furnace. This mockery, this brutality would pursue not only her, but her parents whom she had covered with shame. There could be no wavering, no retreat. The dreadful deed she had done demanded dreadful courage. War was on between her and society. It would be life-long. She wondered if she was strong enough for it.

As she crept up the hill she thought of other women, outcasts like herself; others who wept alone in secret places, for whose sorrows none sorrowed. What became of them? If only there were one she could talk with. But how, in Freedom, where even the winds were freighted with discretion, could she find another woman in whom self-preservation had not been the sovereign instinct?

Before she reached the summit of the steep incline she saw Orme already at the entrance to his gate. Till now she had known no dread of asking him for

work. This purpose had been her mainstay in saying good-by to her home, in the unfriendly walk through the village. But her courage had been overdrawn. She began to wonder whether he, like the other men, would laugh at her. If not, would he dare offer her shelter and once more affront the solidified opinion of the community? Even if he would, ought she to ask this of him? Had she a right to involve him in the knotted consequences of her misconduct?

Since he and she last met it had come to her ears that he gave employment and refuge to Thomas O'Shea who had served a year in the county jail for robbing Wherritt's store to buy whiskey at the Ivy Green. The recollection of this toleration, the tempest in the village it occasioned, stimulated hope in Esther. She judged her position with her own sex to balance that of a thief among men. Perhaps there would be an asylum for her. However, as she approached Orme, the only person of whom she had no dread, she slackened her pace.

Robert waited at the gate. Like a benediction it came upon her that he was waiting for her. There was no mistaking his profound pity for the infirm. He and she stood for a long moment looking as if each expected the other to give a cue for conversation. Orme had the spiritual gift of putting himself in the place of others. He made no circumstance of her thus coming to him. He bent toward her his fine, kind eyes. Of course he knew.

Esther had not seen him for some months. Dur-

ing this interval his countenance had so bloomed with noble sympathies that now his comprehension hurt her more than the derision of the village. Let others understand what they would; for him there should have been no black page. His belief, his faith alone mattered. Why had she not done some sublime thing for him?

"I've been thinking of you to-day, Esther," Robert began, trying to make it easier for her. "I hope you are coming back to work. It's great selfishness on my part, I know; but no one has ever been able to fill your place."

It was precisely his fine concern for her which annihilated Esther's resolution to return to his employ. She turned toward the lake lying there before them with its ever-present invitation to her. "No, Mr. Orme," she answered. "I'm stopping a second to catch my breath. Thank you for your offer, but I shan't be able to come back. I've given up all hope of going to college."

She resumed her journey like a homeless pilgrim who had paused by the wayside for a glass of water. For a brief interval he watched her melancholy figure. "How very bad good people are," he said to himself. "Why didn't I save her from her foolish mother? Why didn't I make a fight for her liberty and send her to college?"

He would help her yet. To stay behind was desertion. He hastened after her, and entreated, "I don't mean to intrude; but I wish you would reconsider, Esther. Your work is invaluable. Re-

member, to-morrow, next week, or next month, any time. . . . I'll be very happy to have you."

"Thank you, but I shall never return," she answered. "Everything is to be different now."

Esther so effectually dammed the channel of Orme's consideration that there was nothing for him but withdrawal. He turned back reluctantly, leaving her to hold her course as she had elected. The farther the girl proceeded, to an intenser degree did the lake become a great, irresistible magnet drawing her—a poor, impotent fleck of base metal. Its water was a soft, warm mother-embrace to shelter her from the cold face of the world and give her slumber. When she turned into the lane leading from the highway to the lake, she espied a dust-covered branch of golden-rod which in its abundant bloom had been plucked by a hostile hand and left to die. She picked it up and carried it with her.

As Esther found herself at the opening in the willows she gazed into the water in which she used to wade as a child. The yellow leaves at the bottom of the lake fascinated her. The girl became conscious of a great power within her—death. She looked back at the village. She had conquered the mockers. They didn't dare die. She did, and disgrace would be done with. Her father had said death was better than shame; but the saintly, suffering countenance of her mother deterred her for a moment. Esther could hear the plaintive voice, "Ah, daughter, you are dying because you don't dare live." It was true: her bravery was cowardice.

Yet why should she live? What could she be but a disgrace to her parents, a village legend gloomy as the legend of Meroz?

Amidst the death in life of her desires, one, however, survived and clamored; the wish again to penetrate the forest where every leaf lisped syllables of her love. Of the forest alone Esther would take leave.

She retraced her steps among the aisles of the magnificent old elm and maple trees where that great fleeting glory, her love, had been born; where it had breathed with bliss equalled in intensity only by its desperate insecurity. One by one its splendid scarlet images wandered out of the past until she forgot that, for her lover, all had been transient as the wooing of birds. His love was dead as the leaves under foot which in the springtime had been its witnesses. And yet, she reflected, its life still survived in her own life. With new despair she realized that in her self-decreed destruction she could not depart alone. She was companioned always. Seating herself on a mossy log where often she had awaited Harry, so vivid was her fancy that she spoke aloud as to one who heard, "You can't ask me to live, can you, my son? You can't ask your mother to endure a lifetime of torture? Now we'll be always together. We'll leave the world which wants us out of it. You forgive me, don't you?"

Thus Orme found Esther looking straight ahead, sometimes stooping impetuously to seize handfuls of dry leaves, to tear them and absently drop them.

When he heard her muttered words he said, "Forgive me for coming. I thought you were speaking to some one—were you?"

As she raised her head she flung at him the entire desperate truth, "Yes, to my son."

Robert forbore all questions and said simply, "Don't go down before these people, Esther. You're too good for that."

His kindliness of glance and utterance transformed her distress into sobs. He seated himself by her side and waited, his eyes closing in pain as she gave her grief to the air. Once he timidly touched her hand, but withdrew it. After her pulses had throbbed themselves into quiet, she said, feebly brushing at her eyes, "You must go back to your house, Mr. Orme."

"When you do. . . . I came for you," he quietly insisted.

"No, no!" she burst out.

"You're not going to be a runaway from life, Esther."

"Oh, I know what you're thinking of, Mr. Orme . . . but you can't save me. I'll come back here to-morrow, the next day or the next. We don't want to remain in a world where every one hates every one else."

His voice soothed her; his presence healed. "Don't judge the world by a few people, Esther. There is kindness even here in Freedom."

"We haven't found it. . . . My son and I have a right to die."

"But why give death such an easy victory?" he asked gently. "Why not resist?"

"Resist? . . . what is there left of me for resistance? I'm a poor, miserable failure."

"So are we all, Esther."

"Not you. You're strong."

"It's good of you to forget, . . . but I'm the historic failure of Freedom. We all know that. Yet it is well to know what failure is. Misfortune proves us. Esther, won't you prove yourself?"

Orme's words were for her strength, and her body cried out to live. "You can say that. You're a man. What chance is there for a woman—a woman like me—to struggle with the world which has already condemned her?"

"Existence is battle, Esther. Make yourself stronger than the world. The saints of to-day don't run away from it. They conquer it. You're very young to be asked to do this; but the victory will be all the greater. You'll find unkindness, but forgive. People don't know better. Don't lament or regret. Live your part. Live it for the noblest in you."

"The noblest?" she interrupted incredulously.

"Yes, you're good enough for anything."

That Orme who had lived through years of darkness saw for her light, that he discovered a fineness in her—this for Esther was nourishment and warmth. He seemed a great priest of good. "You were created to help others," she answered. "How good you are . . . how you have conquered."

"No, Esther, I'm a cheat to talk to you at all. I'm a miserable weakling. If there's hope for me, there is for any one. I say these things to you to fortify myself. . . . Perhaps it's my way of praying."

Every word uttered by Robert became Esther's own. "When you talk to me," she answered faintly, "I grow strong . . . almost brave. I don't think I'm a coward. If I were a man I could die for my country, I believe. The lake doesn't frighten me; but," she spoke with a voice without resonance, like that of one bereft of reason, "I can't go back to Freedom. I can't meet those women who stare at me so. The men are worse. . . . I can't listen to their laughter. This place is a prison. . . . If I could go away. . . . Another sneer or another jeer . . . and I think I'll lose my senses."

"I know just how you feel, Esther. I've gone through it all, but try to bear even Freedom. If you can, and do your best to find happiness in this ignorant, prejudiced village instead of in some dream-country, you'll be happy and you'll be brave."

Robert's words were like a moral illumination. They set in motion her character as other words of his had given impetus to her intelligence. For a second she looked toward the town as if she beheld a sinister, dreadful thing. Then she shuddered. "Oh, but Freedom . . . you don't know it. That place never looked at you as it did at me. You never felt it give you the blow it gave me. You couldn't. You're a man."

Orme's presence promised Esther as much as his words. "Don't mind the little creatures of Freedom. You'll soar over them. They see only shadows. It doesn't matter what they think. Their bad thoughts poison them alone. The only thing which should matter to you, Esther, is what you think of yourself."

"That's it. I think so horribly of myself." But she dimly felt what he desired her to see. "There isn't much hope for me, but I do believe in you. I don't want to hurt you. Father is right. The spirit of God has deserted me. I'll be a curse to every one who tries to help me."

Robert had slight sympathy with these little private views of the Creator; but he, too, often lost himself in the wreaths of smoke he blew when dreaming of the First Cause. And so he answered patiently, "No, no, Esther, there's no such thing as a curse. We are all cripples, groping and stumbling about in darkness. We only go right after we've tried most of the ways of going wrong. Even then, we fall back into the wrong. It's a daily fight to keep from it."

The girl knew that he was thinking not only of her, but of himself. In a second he quickly went on, "But we keep up the struggle because we can't live for ourselves alone. We don't belong to ourselves. Everything we do influences some one else. Other lives depend on ours."

Robert was endeavoring to kindle in her the realization of the duty she owed her unborn child.

He counted on this to save her, but it was a part of his delicacy for Esther to insist that she be the first to phrase it. That she could do this was a symptom of her convalescence of mind. Her countenance was illumined in the exalted moment when she gained a vision of something to live for. The child should be her new purity, her new honor, her new morality, her new faith, her new love.

"If I thought he would wish it,"—her tone betrayed at what cost of anguish this awakened sense of the value of living had been achieved—"I'd do it. I'd do anything . . . I'd suffer anything. I'd starve . . . I'd live. Even those people in Freedom couldn't hurt me. Tell me," she said with widening eyes, "Do you suppose my cowardice has already been stamped on my son?"

"Don't think of such a thing, Esther. Come back to Freedom with me. Take up your work with us, and he'll be brave."

"Do you really think so," she asked doubtfully. "How brave? Brave enough to win battles?"

"The greatest, Esther."

Already the future was envisioned in her deep young face. "And if all the time I read beautiful books and think beautiful thoughts, will he do the same?"

"It can't be otherwise."

"And if I try to get rid of weakness, vanity, unkindness, will he?"

Esther's hope became his own, as he assured her, "Without doubt."

She went on in great exultation, "And he'll begin to read while he's very young, like the great philosopher. Then you'll teach him all the splendid thoughts of those wonderful men who wrote books."

"Yes.

"And I'll study so by the time he's wise and great I shan't be too dull a companion. But, . . . what if this horrible stain starts out on his life? What will he think of me?"

"He'll think of you—I promise that much—what a saint would think of his mother."

The pair were standing facing each other, and Esther gave a faint, fluttering gesture to balance her body as once more she betrothed herself to life. When Robert took her hand it seemed sweet not to die. In the contact, an inarticulate pledge passed between them. "I believe in you, Mr. Orme," she said. "I shouldn't try to live without you. I know you'll keep me up when I break down."

"You'll not break down, Esther. You'll redeem every mistake. Perhaps I shall ask you to give me courage."

Her nature was not changed, but Orme had transformed her ideal of existence. For her life now had a sacred purpose. "I can go on this way by your side until I drop," she murmured, unafraid.

CHAPTER XX

WHEN Esther made her way back to Freedom, though Orme was by her side, she walked alone. The stars were the sneering eyes of women. The wind was the derisive laughter of men. Unaided, with her own strength, she found she must bear it. And she had no more strength. When she and Robert were near the top of the hill she faltered. Had he not caught her in his arms she would have sunk to the ground. "You mustn't ask me to go farther, Mr. Orme," she gasped. "Let me turn back. . . . I'm attempting too much."

Orme chose well the spur to urge her onward, to recall her to her larger self; "Come, Esther, remember the child."

She lived a minute rich with possibilities; then brightening, she responded, "Yes, I mustn't forget."

Raising her head quickly she hastened her pace; but at the top of the hill she lingered to breathe awhile in suffering. Though the golden after-glow was fading on the horizon, already the moon was in the sky. "I'm glad it's dark so early," Esther said. She was thinking of the hundreds of homes in Freedom, wondering if there was one for her. "Where shall I go to-night?" she asked timidly.

Orme's first intention had been that she should

remain at his house; but as Esther spoke, he saw Alice, returning from the village, pass near him and Esther, and even at close range ignore them both. Robert's care that the girl should not receive a wound, acted as a lever to his answer: "You'll work at Mrs. Brewster's until we build another cabin on the hill or get more room. Perhaps you had better remain with her for a time."

"Mrs. Brewster doesn't like Methodists even at the best," Esther demurred. "Do you think she'd let me come to her house now?"

"You surely have learned that the worst thing about Aunty Brewster is her tongue. That is unruly; but she's like a second mother to me, really kind and true-hearted. She doesn't mean a word she says."

Orme left Esther seated on Mrs. Brewster's veranda. He entered the sitting-room where the militant widow was reading her weekly *Boston Transcript*—the only newspaper that she believed told the truth. "Ain't somebody on the stoop?" Mrs. Brewster asked, looking at Robert over her glasses.

"Will you come into the kitchen, Aunty?" he inquired before making response.

When he closed the door Mrs. Brewster, astonished at such unusual procedure, repeated her question, and Orme answered, "It's Esther——"

"You don't mean it's that whiffle-jigger girl, Bobby!"

"Esther Damon is on the porch, Aunty Brewster, if you mean her."

Mrs. Brewster stared stonily. "What are you walking the streets with her for, Bobby? Ain't you heard about her?"

"Yes, it's a tragedy."

This remark from another than Orme might have interrupted diplomatic relations and perhaps have been followed by a declaration of war. The long hairs on the widow's chin bristled. "Tragedy!" she exclaimed, fortifying herself by putting a few extra pins in the blue and white checked apron which she wore as an emblem of superlative worth—a white apron being a vanity to be indulged in only by lazybones. "Umph! anybody can pull the wool over your eyes, Bobby. That girl is one of those low creatures they have in New York. Don't have no sich folks in Boston."

"Oh, yes, they do, Aunty Brewster, thousands of them—even much worse, because we're all weak."

"You may be, Bobby—although I dare anybody to say it behind your back—but I ain't weak. I ain't whiffy-whaffy." To establish the assertion, Mrs. Brewster seated herself by her shining stove and took up a poker. The significance of this act was that the fortress was adequately supplied with munitions of war and could resist any siege likely to be laid. But Orme had known his opponent too long ever to attack with methods familiar to her.

"I know you're not, Aunty Brewster," he answered with a smile, very winning because so seldom called into service. "You're strong. That's why I come

to you when I need a friend. You're the only person who never fails me. So I'm here now."

It was some seconds before the blaze in Mrs. Brewster's countenance testified to the precision of Orme's aim. The widow menaced him with the poker as she returned fire: "Quit right there, Bobby. None of your lolly-gagging. When you were a little fellow and wanted me to make you a pie or fry you some doughnuts you always used to tell me I was the best cook in Freedom."

"I still say it." He was determined that no strategic point of vantage should be overlooked.

"I don't care if you do. I won't have that whiffle-jigger girl here," she stormed.

He helplessly placed the case in her hands. "Where is the poor girl to go then?"

Mrs. Brewster knew he was trying to stir her pity. Waving the colors of the fortress, the poker, she resisted, "How do I know? I ain't got any sympathy with such cattle. I always behaved myself and I expect every one to do the same. I want you to understand, Bobby Orme, I was the purest-minded girl in Marlboro, Massachusetts."

This boast had passed unquestioned through the village clearing-house for reputations on the day of Mrs. Brewster's arrival in Freedom. Robert had often heard it, but he showed no diluted interest in her self-acclaimed attribute. Instead he laid hold of it, and used it as heavy artillery. "That's just why you can let this poor, unfortunate girl come here, Aunty. You are so irreproachable, so big and

fine and generous-hearted, so full of decent human feeling,"—he heaped her qualities before her with extravagant hand—"that you can afford to let her live with you. Won't you be her protectress? You're so much kinder than any other woman I know, I'm sure you will."

"Live in this house? Do you think I've got a room to let up here?" Mrs. Brewster's poker indicated her high, broad forehead over which the white hair was parted. "Say, you're green, green and looney."

Orme braved it. "Yes, live here with you, Aunty Brewster, and work. You always said Esther Damon wove beautifully. What is she to do? Think how young she is. You know Elder Damon turned her out of the church and out of the house."

With this shot the bombarder found an unguarded entrance to the citadel. Mrs. Brewster's features relaxed as she grunted, "Umph! Much religion them Methodists have got anyway. They've got brass to come up here and try to save my soul because I can afford to wear a breast-pin and gold-rimmed spectacles. I told Mis' Damon she'd better look out for her own nest. She said hell was for Universalists. I guess Methodists have a little of it too. That's what comes of running around the streets, tending to other folks' business."

At the sight of the drooping colors Orme flanked her and followed with another broadside: "You're quite right, Aunty Brewster. Why have religion if it isn't for use in your own life? The Methodists

will feel the rebuke if you shelter Esther Damon. Show them that if you don't accept the divinity of Jesus, you do follow the Golden Rule."

Mrs. Brewster did not immediately perceive when the enemy planted a standard in the stronghold commanding the fort. A pleased smile played about the corners of her mouth. But discovering the advantage Orme had gained, she put on her spectacles and once more waved the poker to indicate that the brief truce for the purpose of carrying off the wounded was at an end. "No, Bobby, I won't. She ought to marry the fellow."

"What if he's already married, Aunty?"

"A married man! Worse and worse! I'm ashamed to live in Freedom." Then the widow's curiosity gained ascendency over her horror. "Who is it, Bobby?"

Orme found the truth not easy to utter, but he explained, "It is said she was engaged to young Clancy. He married a few weeks ago and left her."

"The Catholics and whiskey will be the ruination of this country if we don't get rid of them. These furriners hadn't ought to be allowed to build a church. They should be drove out of America." Mrs. Brewster ground her teeth as though by that process to diminish the number of the alien-born. "I'd have the law after that scalawag if I was the minister. I'd lock him up where he belongs. Why don't they?"

"Women, I am told, sometimes think a great deal of scoundrels," answered Orme slowly.

When Mrs. Brewster removed her spectacles, wiped them, and coughed loudly, she gave the signal for the fall of the colors. Resistance was at an end when she said, "Ain't women soft fools?"

"Not all of them, Aunty Brewster," replied Orme with diplomacy which avoided an implication that there had been a siege or surrender.

"It's an awful risk," held out Mrs. Brewster. "What will folks think?"

"What will you think if you don't? This poor girl would be dead now if I hadn't brought her back from the lake."

With the corner of her apron Mrs. Brewster dried her eyes; but as she snuffled her tears she resisted. "I don't care, Bobby Orme. She's a bad girl, a bad girl. She ought to be punished. She deserves all she gets. But women are the unluckiest critters living. I don't want to pick up a paper and read that the minister's daughter died because I wouldn't take her in. I care that much about *my* church."

The widow was silent for a second, during which she reflected that her resistance had done scant credit to her Revolutionary ancestors. Putting on her spectacles, as though astonished to find a besieger quite making himself at ease in her fortress, she said doughtily, "Now, I suppose you think you can just wind me right around your little finger, and I'm an old softy, don't you, Bobby? Well, you can't. I want you to understand that. No one can. I'm of the old New England blood, with not a furriner in it. None of them can come it over me."

Then Mrs. Brewster boldly took this leap, "I want that girl to march straight into this house and have something to eat and go to bed." She herself opened the screen door of the sitting-room. "Come in, Miss Whiffle-Whaffle. I can never think of a name."

"It's Esther," said the girl, warming herself in the welcoming cheer of the room.

"Of course," answered Mrs. Brewster, "of course it is. What are you doing whick-whacking around there on the stoop? Why didn't you come right in in the first place and not pay any attention to that Bobby Orme. He ain't got manners enough for a chicken, and he's queer besides—queer as Dick's hat-band. He thinks I'm set in my ways and hard to get along with. I ain't a bit. He's set. Every one in Freedom is terrible set. Never saw such a place. Not much like Marlboro, Massachusetts. I did say I'd never take boarders again. Weaving is so much easier than frying over a cook-stove. But any one can get along with me that ain't lazy. I hate folks that lie abed. You ain't got a lazy bone in your body. You look kind o' played out, Esther," Mrs. Brewster said, suddenly staring at the girl. "You sit right where you are. No, don't you stir. I guess I can get tea."

CHAPTER XXI

WHEN it became known in Freedom that queer old Mrs. Brewster had given shelter to Esther Damon the widow prepared for a "regular old Bunker Hill fight" with the village. In reality she lived at her highest in the smell of powder. Mrs. Brewster's sortie from her house the morning after Esther's arrival was in her thought historic. She imagined she understood how President Lincoln had felt when he declared war. Market basket on arm, she set out for the Four Corners to purchase groceries.

Mrs. Snead, the Baptist deacon's wife, nearest neighbor of the widow, sat at her window reading the Bible. When Mrs. Brewster passed, Mrs. Snead looked up to break a lance: "Good morning, Mis' Brewster. Is what Ira Wherritt says true? I told him I guessed no likely woman would have that trollop in the house." Then she blandly questioned, "You haven't, have you?"

The widow laid about her recklessly. "These hard-shelled Baptists would let folks die in the street before they'd give 'em a cup of cold water."

In triumph Mrs. Brewster proceeded until she met Georgiana Posey, the village milliner. With the painful accumulation of modesty arising from

fifty years of spinsterhood, Miss Posey blushed, shook her fair ringlets, fidgeted, and with furtive, averted eyes, inquired concerning the fascinating, proscribed creature. Of course everybody should be charitable, but it was too awful. Such a thing had never happened in Freedom before.

Mrs. Brewster, emitting a belligerent grunt, bore down upon her. "It would take a standing army to make Freedom hoe its own row first. This town would go to bed with cramps if it minded its business for a week."

Mrs. Brewster belabored the clerks at Spear's for their curiosity. She pounced upon the sneering Ira Wherritt as a "snoop." She let fly at the druggist. She launched out against numerous other questioners, and returned to her house with a sense of having had a "tantoram of a time."

Her fondness for Esther began in being obliged to defend her. It increased when she found the girl sitting stunned before a package of her belongings just received from Elder and Mrs. Damon. Esther's shabby clothing, her religious books, that evidence of her vanity—a little triangular piece of mirror—were all spread out on the table. What had been intended as a kindness to Esther was for her only another casting-off. Mrs. Brewster took in the situation at a glance.

"Oh, these I'm-better-than-you-are folks! I wonder what they're sending you such rubbish as that for," she raged, gathering the things in her capable arms and starting for the kitchen. "Ain't fit to wear.

Let's burn 'em up and get rid of them an' buy some decent things. Look at them shoes." She thrust her finger through a hole.

"No, no," Esther protested, hurrying after Mrs. Brewster. "Don't do that. I know they're ugly, but . . . I wore them before . . . a long time ago . . . I'd like to keep them always."

"Everybody to his own taste," answered Mrs. Brewster brusquely. "But let's get 'em out of sight." As she carried the things into the best bedroom which opened off the sitting-room she suddenly decided, "This spare room is yours, Esther."

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Brewster, but don't give me the best room."

"I will if I want to. What have you got to say about it? I don't have much company anyway."

Mrs. Brewster's affection for Esther was soon again given another stimulus. The two Butts sisters, washed-out maidens of indefinite age, came as usual to their work. When they saw Esther "tripping the treadle" in the sitting-room they learned that the incredible rumor was true. Mrs. Brewster expected them to work in the same house with Esther Damon. Their ideas were few but sharply defined. They wouldn't. After a mute conference with their eyes, they drew their neat skirts about them and departed, never to return. Esther tossed the shuttle faster than before. She must make up to Orme for his loss of the Butts' services.

The wife and daughter of Michael Magee, the blacksmith, were too poor to pay for the luxury of

fastidious discrimination. They would not have touched Esther with the tips of their square fingers; but after a secret conclave with Mrs. Brewster in the kitchen they promised to go on with their work on condition that Esther should never enter the attic where their looms were.

Mrs. Brewster attempted to keep from the girl the terror incited by her among these women whose lives had been sealed to evil; but Esther's sensibilities were so sharpened by pain that she guessed all concealed from her. She had always been a dominating figure in school. From her world of Methodists she had received adulation. It was difficult for her to understand that in a few days she had really become a monster. Mrs. Brewster sensed her suffering, and, by way of showing sympathy, brought her a piece of mince-pie and some home-made molasses candy. These Esther pretended to eat, but when Mrs. Brewster returned to the kitchen, pie and candy were thrown out of the window.

The cruelty of the morning but united Esther more closely with the spirit of her unborn child. She could not have braved the day for herself, but it was a sublime delight to do so for him, to toil with the strength of her love for him. So her shuttle became winged; her feet knew no rest.

At noon Esther helped Mrs. Brewster wash the dishes, then she went on with her work at the loom. At four o'clock, when the Magees left, so intent was she on her task that she forgot this was the hour for assembling in the work-shop on the hill to hear

Orme's discourse. Half an hour later Mearns arrived with a note from Robert to Mrs. Brewster. "Kindly insist that Esther come to the lecture this afternoon." The message was shown the girl.

"I'm sorry Mr. Orme wrote," Esther said. "I can't go."

"Why not?"

"I can't . . . Mrs. Brewster."

"I hope you don't mind fools and pigs," the widow counselled, less brusquely than usual. "Hold up your head. You've got as much right to go as any one. Bobby Orme wants you to come. He'll be mad if you don't. I don't take any stock in book learning; but you've wove like fury since morning, and even books is better'n killing yourself."

That Robert questioned so little, heeded so little the opinions of others, presented itself anew to Esther as a part of the greatness of his attitude toward life. This realization brought her to her feet. Mrs. Brewster wrapped her in a long black shawl—Esther had never owned a cloak—and the widow insisted that she put on overshoes. The first snow of the season was falling in large, ragged flakes.

In passing the Orme cabin Esther noticed Alice seated at the window, sewing. The girl's religious environment had rendered Esther singularly devoid of deference to material distinction, but her desire for knowledge gave her humble reverence for superior minds. She wondered how Mrs. Orme could remain away from her husband's lecture. It did not occur

to Esther that Alice Orme's absence measured the distance between husband and wife

When Esther opened the door of the work-shop she was greeted by an atmosphere of warmth and welcome. Logs blazed in the fireplace of the great room, which was wainscoted to the roof and had wide windows looking out on the valley. In the centre of the work-shop was a huge round table littered with books and periodicals, on which stood a large urn filled with branches of oak and evergreen. Before the fire, surrounded by a group of men and women was Orme. He wore the overalls and blouse of the workmen. In one corner stood a youth with honey-colored hair, looking into the eyes of a blushing country girl. In another corner sat a boy, sketching. Before a small table was a middle-aged woman experimenting with bookbinding. Fully half of the room was occupied by unfinished furniture. There was laughter, chatter, and good-fellowship. Esther felt the personality of Orme in everything. She realized that getting a living was not of necessity a dull kind of business.

At first the girl was timid before so many unfamiliar faces, but when Orme came forward to greet her she knew what it was to be with one who took life in a fine, free way; who saw beyond her disgrace, against which beat the hard glaring light of Freedom. She did not realize it, but as he looked at Esther he set her apart from all others. "I've been waiting for you," he said simply as he escorted her to a chair.

Many of the workmen seated themselves on the furniture; some on tables; others on benches. Few of those present knew who Esther was. Most of Orme's recruits came from the boys and girls of the farms and surrounding towns who were struggling to get an education. The men who lived in Freedom had each in turn been championed by Robert, and they recognized his courage in asking Esther to the lecture. But the women called it audacity. The Magees and their friends moved their chairs audibly when Esther was seated near them. To avoid the hurt of their hostility, she carried her chair and placed it beside Thomas O'Shea, an old soldier who had served a term in the county jail. The shadow of the prison still trailed after the nervous little man, and he raised eyes glad with gratitude to Esther. His smile gave her a glow of pleasure, that even her sympathy could confer happiness on one forlorn being.

For more than a year Esther had wished to hear Orme speak. It was the irony of existence that at last, under such circumstances, her wish should be gratified. This afternoon he talked of Dion, the Dion of Plutarch. Robert's vocabulary was simple. He made no effort. He held in mind all in the room, even Thomas O'Shea. With a few simple words he portrayed Dion, his nobility of spirit, his wisdom, his heroism, his great life. In talking, Robert distracted the listeners from their narrow interests and raised in them a new value of living. Esther recognized herself in the presence of a great teacher. As he progressed

she surrendered her mind to him. She wished to have him interpret for her the world; to possess no thought but his. Leaning forward, she knew she listened not only for herself but for the unborn being she called her son. Orme's words became part of them both.

And a wonderful fancy laid hold on her. It was seed, plant, and flower in an instant, abloom with all the hues of a rainbow. Her child should be like the great Greek . . . perhaps a second Dion! One day the little intruder might become her glory. Esther's hope mounted until she even saw him as the torch with which she should blaze through the future, thereby in the truest sense to become immortal. Who would deprive her of this pleasure dream? It was to color many a gray day of conflict with the world.

For the second hour, as a rule, Orme selected a theme from elementary natural science, ethics, or political economy. The previous summer the working-people had studied a simple botany. This afternoon Robert chose as a topic the history of a piece of chalk. But so profoundly had the first hour penetrated all most vital within Esther that for a second she found her thoughts straying as he held the chalk before his readers. His intention was to outline the evolution of the earth.

At this period the Academy of Freedom accepted as valid the Mosaic theory of creation. When Orme presented the scientific explanation of comets, meteors, constellations, the earth, he did not realize

his words were startling or revolutionary. He enumerated the geological ages, the great eras of change, and finally fixed in the earth-story the small piece of chalk. It was all told like romance. He could light up facts until they glowed like fiction. As Orme spoke he seemed to communicate specially with each listener. Toward the close of his talk the dumb fear on the countenance of Esther perplexed him.

When he finished speaking, the working-people gathered about him, presenting their questions, seeking suggestions and help. Esther sat still. But when at last only O'Shea and Griggs remained, Robert excused himself and approached her. "Did I say anything to trouble you to-day?" he inquired.

The girl's thoughts rushed forth in a question to meet his query. "Is what you said this afternoon true, Mr. Orme?"

"I dare say I made errors. What have you in mind?"

"Your words about the creation of the earth."

Out of the earnestness of Esther's manner there came to Robert a vision of a splendid edifice, the bricks and mortar of which were centuries of belief, sacrifice, and renunciation. At last he comprehended, and with a fine regret, for so delicate and profound was his respect for the spiritual belief of others that he never intentionally sowed seed for a harvest of doubt. With the consideration of the gentlemanly-minded, he responded, "I think it is, Esther."

Her expression was a vague blur. She was like

the dove of the ark, vainly seeking dry land amidst the waste of waters. "Wasn't the world created in six days by God? . . . I'd like to know."

"Science doesn't say so," he answered mildly.

During the intense interval of silence he could hear her breathe. "Do you think science is right, Mr. Orme?"

Robert tried to modify his words with his manner as he replied, "I can't help thinking so."

"Do all wise people agree with you?"

Orme would have retreated, but his conscience urged him to go on, "Most of those the world calls wise."

There was a pause in which she seemed to steel herself for the venture of all her faith. "Then wise people don't think the Bible is true?"

Robert could not commit the sacrilege of interfering with the girl's belief, but he was obliged to answer. "No, I shouldn't say that. Rather a collection of myths. There was probably a Hercules to inspire the Greek legend."

"Then the Christian God is a legend? Do you think that, Mr. Orme?"

Robert recalled that twice before she had turned to him for help; but saving her body from death was to his thinking not so grave as directing her spiritual life. He was glad of this third appeal; it brought her close to him. But he shrank from the responsibility it involved. "Does it matter what I think?"

"It matters very much to me."

Why couldn't she have known how her words turned the room, his life, the world, into magic for him? He wondered that he could speak, but her deep eyes steadied him. "Esther, it might matter if I knew the truth, but no one understands what it is. Perhaps if the real truth, and the truth of religion, science, and philosophy should meet, they wouldn't recognize each other. There is no clarion to proclaim truth when it appears. Perhaps it is with us all . . . perhaps no one has ever felt it. You Methodists have your belief; so have philosophers and men of science. Each thinks his own absolute. No one knows which is right. Perhaps man isn't fit for truth at all. Perhaps he can no more understand it than a dog can understand Aristotle. I was too arrogant about my truth. I had forgotten you hadn't studied geology. I didn't realize how little science is taught at the Academy. Believe what you feel will most help you."

His care for her faith, his endeavor not to hurt her, was to Esther beautiful; but she replied, "If what science says should be true—if God didn't make the world . . . then the prophets . . . sin . . . redemption . . . all must go."

Orme realized he had only to reason, to insist, gently to withdraw a few stones from the foundation of her belief, and the entire structure would crash upon her; but he feared that she at present could not survive such a disaster. For this reason he replied, "I don't like to decide for you, Esther."

Then the girl took a big, glad bound into the sur-

face of doubt as if, with the quick perception of genius, she suddenly formulated for herself a chart of its waters. "But, Mr. Orme, if the idea of sin weren't always hanging over us, how free we should be. We could be our own judges."

"And who of us is fit for that, Esther? I'm sorry you heard me, . . . sorry I disturbed you for a moment."

"I thought you were an infidel."

"They call me that because I'm one of those who don't know. I lost faith in the old belief and read and studied to find it, but I only wandered farther away. Every one must have some kind of religion. Hold fast to yours until you're strong enough to shed it. When one is young faith is poetry, promise, hope. It's good for you."

It was Esther's first venture away from the safe shore of orthodoxy where she had lived for nearly twenty years. She returned to the land with which she was familiar. "I must keep religion," she said. "Perhaps all you wise men are mistaken, and some day you'll find it out. Sometimes," she said, beset by fear, "sometimes I am afraid either . . . there is no God or . . . He has withdrawn Himself from me. He never hears my prayers."

The girl was so much alone in the world that Orme did not have it in his heart to alienate her from the comfort of faith. "Don't feel that way, Esther. . . . If there is a God, and He hears any prayers they will be yours."

CHAPTER XXII

DURING the winter which closed down on Freedom Esther by day never left Mrs. Brewster's cottage. She found curious peace in work during the week; but when Sunday came and the church bells began to ring, the old ache returned. She knew that the brothers and sisters in the little meeting-house often glanced at the vacant place by her mother's side. Perhaps her parents were never so conscious of her transgression as on the holy day. Sunday, instead of being a time of rest, was for the girl a time of torture. Then came the yearning to see her mother. In her dreams Esther re-lived her father's denunciation. Often on Sunday nights, while the town slept, she rose, dressed and made her way through falling snow and raging wind to the door of the parsonage. She could not enter, but sometimes she sat on the steps and tried to forget that she was proscribed. She imagined that the door opened and her parents bade her come in. But they never did. Her gliding about in storms after midnight gave rise to the belief still current in Freedom that the village was haunted by a woman in black.

Visitors seldom came to Aunty Brewster's house, but Orme appeared daily. Yet he did not enter.

Sometimes he heard Esther's voice, left a book for her or made an inquiry. Business he transacted with Mrs. Brewster at the door and went away. Though Esther never saw Robert, he lingered in the volumes she opened. His friends became her friends. Those heroes of history who had sustained him through dark days seemed always to have awaited her. They widened and enriched her intelligence; they winged her imagination; they fortified her soul; they created in her a finer conscience. The girl no longer lived in humdrum, rudimentary Freedom. Robert gave her a world of brave men and women. She kept pace with them through fields of story, poetry, and philosophy. Their joys became her own, their sufferings, their faiths, their loves. And Orme was always at her side. She read again each sentence he had underscored. It was a message from him. Robert lived in the world of Stoics. She said she would make it hers. Its thoughts spun themselves into her passionate musings on her unborn child; worked themselves into her blood, into her future, exalted her with a sense of omnipotence.

By slow degrees, as Esther went from loom to book and from book to loom, her sense of isolation and exile, so natural to one of her youth, lessened. In an old volume she found an engraving of Dion; and she continued to think her son would be like the great Greek. This faith was new strength. From it flowered the finest shades of responsibility for the sacred office of maternity. Her one aspiration was not to give way to thoughts or feelings un-

worthy to reappear in her son. In creating her child, she herself was re-created.

As Esther aged mentally, she went far from the orthodox faith of her parents; but she was never so conscious of a great spiritual destiny. Mrs. Damon's passion for perfection took possession of her. She wished to cleanse herself of every impurity, to burn evil out of her being. God became greater than the narrow, Hebraic God of her father's church. To this new God, the loving Father of all the world, she often knelt and prayed. At times she wished that in prayer on her knees she might pass the period of suspense until her child should be born.

But this cloudless communion was inevitably to be interrupted. Strangely enough it was Mrs. Damon who caused Esther to realize that there was a world outside of the one she had created for herself. One day Esther heard labored, heavy feet crunching in the snow. Even before, through the fantastically frosted window pane, the girl espied her mother approaching, she guessed who it was. It needed precisely this presence for Esther with her higher conscience to accuse herself as a monster of selfishness who had wantonly violated her parents' home. Her love of pleasure, her impatience, her tempests of passion, her rebellion crowded her brain, as she looked at the wonderful, old, battered face of her mother. Then the stoical calm the girl had tried to acquire became fugitive. She distractedly turned to Mrs. Brewster whose spectacles were interrogation points.

"Well, what shall I do?" that valiant woman asked. "Shall I open the door?"

What should she do, Esther demanded of herself. There was an interval in which she imagined she could hear her mother breathing on the other side of the door. The two alternatives open seemed equal in their cruelty; one of meeting Mrs. Damon, the other of avoiding her by taking refuge in another room. After hurried, confused consideration, Esther judged it less unkind to spare her mother the sight of her. "I can't meet mother," she said finally. "I can't bear to see her grieve. . . . Her tenderness would kill me. Tell her that, Mrs. Brewster, won't you? Say everything that's kind . . . and promise her some day I'll go to see her . . . I can't now."

Mrs. Brewster imagined herself supremely kind to Mrs. Damon. In truth, the widow was merely less brusque than usual. Yet, it must not go unacknowledged that she did somewhat repress her inclination to flaunt her satisfaction in the demonstrated unworkability of the Methodist discipline. The visitor was more bent than half a year before. Her smile was richer in pathos. In the soul shining from the pathetic eyes, there was no sign of desistance from the hourly struggle to transform imperfection into perfection.

"Well, Mis' Damon—" the widow challenged as if two armed clerical hosts were meeting in combat.

Mrs. Damon, sitting wearily in her chair, had no show of courage to offer in return. "I've come to

see my daughter, Mrs. Brewster. . . . May I speak with her?"

Mrs. Brewster might have been more generous, but she fairly sputtered, "You've been a long time about it, it seems to me, for such a Christian as you are."

The visitor was not a doughty opponent, and the widow experienced none of the thrill of combat. "So it would seem, Mrs. Brewster. But I haven't been very well. . . . I thought Jesus would call me home. He didn't. . . . I dare say He thinks me unprepared."

Mrs. Brewster could now exclaim in triumph, "Oh, you used to think you were the only person in Freedom who wasn't going straight to hell."

"Did I really speak that way? I always knew my heart was unseemly. Some shortcoming of mine must be responsible for this misfortune of my poor daughter." Mrs. Damon sat with folded hands and looked up with a touching smile as she asked, "Did you say she would see me soon?"

"No, Mis' Damon, I didn't," confessed the widow, somewhat disconcerted. "Mebbe you know Esther's a terrible headstrong girl. If she gets set in her way you can't change her any more than you can stop six wild horses running away. That's her natural gait. She told me to tell you she just couldn't bear to see you or any one just now. By and by she says she'll go to see you."

"Poor Esther!" Mrs. Damon made a pathetic effort to control herself as she inspected the broken

finger-nails of her yellow hands with their swollen purple veins. "She was always such a proud girl. Just as if I should see anything of her but how she looked when she was a baby, and all the way up through childhood. But I know how she feels. She's a very good child, if one understands her as I do. . . . Is she well?" She added anxiously, "I hope she's not too sad."

Mrs. Brewster rarely confessed herself confounded, but now she admitted, "I don't know whether she is or not. I don't understand her very well. She works and reads her head off, and she's away up in the clouds most of the time. Too much books. I don't know what is in her head, but I guess it's about the future."

Mrs. Damon rose, and taking Mrs. Brewster's hand in her own said: "You'll take care of my dear child, won't you? Jesus will reward you. I'm so grateful you gave Esther such a good home." Glancing toward the loom she asked, "Is this where she works, Mrs. Brewster?" Mrs. Damon looked long at the bright-colored woof with which the loom was filled. "Ah, that was it," she sighed. "The poor girl liked those rich colors, all which allured the eye, but I did, too . . . I believed that Jesus would help her as He did me. I'm sure He will yet. When the dear child started to weave to buy herself ribbons she wove more than innocent carpets . . . she wove a net of folly and error in which her young feet tripped." Mrs. Damon sat for some time in silence, touching tenderly the shuttle. Presently she asked, "Does Esther work hard?"

"She don't have to work hard, Mrs. Damon, but she does. She works as if she was crazy. She does everything as if she was crazy. And sometimes she looks as if she was crazy, until I just give up."

"That's just like Esther," said the mother fondly. "Her life was always a fever; but God loves a fiery servant. If only she would come to Him."

Mrs. Brewster sniffed. "Esther's all right. Lots of folks in this town ain't fit to black her boots. She ain't any lazy-bones. Last week she made eight dollars. Every week she makes five or six."

"So much!" exclaimed Mrs. Damon in alarm. "I hope she has no desire to lay up manna. But she'll need money when she's not alone. . . . Do you mind showing me where my little girl sleeps, Mrs. Brewster?"

"She locked herself in her room," confessed the widow, more distressed than she liked by the emotion in Mrs. Damon's face.

"Oh, I so wanted to see her," the mother said in unwilling departure, "because . . . we're going to Attica to live. I'm not very strong. . . . "

"Goin' away to Attica?" Mrs. Brewster had the villager's thrill consequent upon being the first to receive an important official communication. Even Mrs. Snead had not preceded her and wiped the bloom from the freshness of the information. "Why, who's goin' to take Elder Damon's place here?"

"No one. It was decided this morning to close the church."

The melancholy with which the minister's wife spoke was wasted on Mrs. Brewster. To the widow

it was the latest edition of news. "You don't say!"

"Yes, Brother and Sister Hames didn't like the sermon my husband preached on Esther. Then Brother and Sister Killit don't want to come any more." The mother preferred not to disclose that since the discovery of Esther's disgrace, it had been agreed among the church members that the day of Elder Damon's effectiveness as a minister of the Gospel in Freedom was past. "My husband has had so much encouragement in Attica and Olivet that he will preach only in those two places. Will you kindly say that to Esther, and will you tell her . . . we leave to-morrow?" Mrs. Damon was at the door, and before leaving she added, "Mrs. Brewster, will you make her understand that although her father will not admit it, I think he regrets tearing her name from the church book. Tell her I pray always for her salvation . . . If we never meet here, we shall round the great white throne."

The mother knelt in silent prayer.

. . . . . .

The long sleigh was heaped high with household belongings of familiar aspect. Esther, looking out at the vehicle which stopped before Mrs. Brewster's house, saw the humble little bed that had been hers, the bed of her girlhood. The portrait of Wesley looked reluctant to depart. It was the beginning of her friendship with Orme. There was the modest mahogany table, the horsehair furniture, and everywhere the pride of the family uprooted and by her

turned adrift. Elder Damon, seated on the side farther from Esther, with unremitting severity, looked straight before him; but the mother's tender eyes were gathering one last impression of the house which sheltered her daughter from the pitiless ironies of the world.

The girl recognized the conveyance as the property of Brother Simpkins. The "hired man" in the employ of that brother was descending from his seat, and clapping his hands to ward off the wintry chill. He brought a parcel to the door. Mrs. Brewster received it while Esther pressed her face against the window pane, her longing glance embracing and caressing her mother. As the sleigh started off once more toward Attica, Mrs. Damon saw Esther and blessed her with the regard of a saint, a saint who had transcended doubt. But the minister had no benediction for Esther. The last tie between the girl and her home was severed. Her father had abandoned her. He had abandoned Freedom.

Colder and colder grew the outcast as she turned from the blurred windows. Shivering in her shawl, she huddled piteously over the package in her hands, put there she knew not when. As she broke the wrapping cord, how the sleighbells tolled! How tragic seemed the driving away of a load of furniture! From the paper fell a fluttering array of little doll-sized dresses, quite discolored with age. Esther perceived the sweet beauty of intention in the offering, and love and sorrow took her heart by storm in a

way unknown to the Stoics. All deepest in her own mother nature possessed her as she buried her face in the tiny flannel garments. Hot tears blurred her eyes, and it was only after a long interval that she could decipher the words scrawled by the rheumatic hands of her mother:

My Poor, Darling Esther:

Every stitch of these things was taken in love and with prayers to our dear God to bless you, the baby who was to wear them. I have always kept them. Now they're yours with the same love and the same prayers.

I deeply desired to see you yesterday, Esther. I had much to say that my weak hand can ill express. First, I think the sun will soon set for the last time on the wrath of your father. I hope it will not be long before I can persuade him to allow you to come home to us. Your father, however, is not of a spirit that compromises or recants; in this he greatly resembles the prophets. But my prayers are being answered and his love for you is working in his heart. Though he himself does not mention your name, he has allowed me to speak of you repeatedly during the past fortnight. You know I take no step without first consulting him, and yesterday it filled my heart with bliss and thankfulness that when I told him I was going to see you he offered no objection. On my return he opened the door, came down into the street to assist me, and looked at me with eager questions in his eyes. He said nothing, but listened; and last evening, despite the fact that it marked a sad event, he seemed very happy. His last prayer in the house was beautiful as I have rarely known his prayers to be.

Dear Esther, I'm going away, but you were never dearer to me than you are now. You have not sinned against me, dear daughter, but against our Heavenly Father. Let Him be your friend. Let Him help you. I leave you in His care.

And I am beset by no doubts of the outcome; for, dear daughter, of late I have had wonderful manifestations of the blessed Jesus. I saw you in a vision of those clothed in white who come up through great tribulation and are made perfect through suffering. I saw you the companion of angels. I saw you crowned. It was sounded from heaven that you were saved. This was while I was ill, and no vision of such beauty ever before blessed me. I believe that after long wandering you will find Him. Some of the greatest saints were those who strayed longest in darkness.

Remember, dear child, that whatever comes, your mother is always your mother. A bridge of love unites us that can never be destroyed. I will come to you whenever you wish. 'The Lord watch between me and Thee while we are absent one from another.'

MOTHER.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE larks came north with their southern songs of love. Hyacinths and narcissus, all the fairer in their beauty which had slept under the snow, ruled the day in Freedom. One morning Esther awoke with a sense of renewal of spring in her own heart. Her son was at her side. His dimples, his rosiness, his soft, fuzzy head, his every movement was to her a grace. His every feature was an exquisite flower now for the first time giving its sweet breath to the air. His low wail made her understand why a tigress burned to death in her cage rather than leave her young and escape alone. When the mother felt the contact of the warm, small body; knew the velvety touch of this tiny, appealing creature for whom she had exchanged reputation, parents, home, he was the more dear for his exorbitant cost.

As Esther regained her strength it came over her that no longer were her own experiences the basis of her life. Nature had taken the plastic, passionate, self-centred girl and made of her a woman who existed only in her son. Before his birth her every thought and feeling had been concentrated in an endeavor to instil into him some rare super-human perfection. Now her every care was for the child's future. Only that portion of the world relating to him

concerned his mother, or rather, he became for her the centre of the world.

That on occasions there rose from the submerged past a reproachful reminder of the girl she once had been, merely caused her to feel more sharply estranged from her buried existence. One of these resurgent images confronted her when Mrs. Brewster deprecatingly, as if ashamed of being entrapped in a kindness, laid at her side a lavender gingham dress. Esther caught herself in the frivolity of liking the lavender dress. Then wonder broke over her that there had been a phase of her existence when ribbons, laces, lavender dresses, and personal adornment were of superlative value. The confirmation of their transient hour of reality was in the lavender gingham. How she must have chattered of it in those far-off, forgotten days before she had a son to nurture, clothe, and protect—a son for whom to pass restless nights; to shield from every sound, every treacherous current of air, every unkind look or word.

Small and dependent as was the baby, he ruled Esther's loom, Mrs. Brewster's house, Mrs. Brewster herself. The women were sorry they couldn't give him the moon and stars. When once more Esther resumed her usual duties she knew the pang of daily separation from her child; but he easily habituated himself to inattention; with the drone of the loom in his ears, he slept always before his mother's eyes in a dingy little cradle.

The other weavers had long since been transferred to the new cabin on the hill, and so Esther thus far

had encountered none of the villagers. The coming of the child had awakened in Mrs. Brewster unwonted delicacies and consideration for her boarder. She even thought to spare Esther the bulletin of the neighbors' comments; suffered her to remain in ignorance of the remark made by Mrs. Snead that it was a pity the Damon girl and her baby hadn't died—they both would have been better off. The widow did not mention that the neighbors avoided the house as plague-infested; there was a high tension of horror in the community. In consequence, Esther bade fair to forget the irreproachable moral book-keeping of the village.

Her first reminder of the existence of an extraneous world came one day when she saw Orme approach—approach slowly, as if to give her time to prepare for his coming, for the pain of it and of his association with the outer facts of life. Sight of him instantly revealed to Esther that her friend was a part of that established conscience which must always remain hostile to her and her child. There was no time to reflect on alternatives. For her, indeed, there was but one. Directly she saw Robert she dropped the shuttle and seized her son in her arms. Thus she sat when the visitor appeared in the doorway.

Hitherto Orme had seen Esther only in the dull garb of a Methodist. Now she was clad in the lavender gingham dress. Her eyes were downcast. Her flaming hair was in luxuriant plaits which surmounted and emphasized like a diadem the high

dignity of her head. There came over him a vision of some immaculate, consecrated mother who, in her human state, blushed and wondered if she had sinned because she had brought into the world and held in her arms a god. Esther raised her glance with unwavering directness to Orme, scanned his every lineament for censure. She saw only gentleness and consideration. Then she coerced her trembling voice to say, "This is my son, Dion, Mr. Orme."

"I am glad you look as happy as the mother of Dion should," he answered. The little one held out a rosy finger and gripped Robert's coat. This act seemed to seal a bond between the three.

"I'm happy," Esther went on nervously, as if trying to catch her breath, "for I've forgotten myself. I know now why you always kept up so splendidly. You adopted all the poor and unhappy. They're your children. . . . But how are you?"

"Oh, I—" he smiled deprecatingly, as if embarrassed by the topic.

"How is the factory getting on?"

"Splendidly. We have new workmen. One young fellow walked a hundred miles just to come here. He arrived barefoot. He wants to go to college. He understands making stained glass windows and he wishes to do some for the work-shop. We have given him the opportunity." Robert always used the "we" in preference to "I." "Our botany class is soon going out on an expedition. Can't you join us?"

Orme endeavored to speak as if this course for her were generally expected, but his words showed Esther fresh difficulties. "I dread that horribly. I'm so happy here. . . . Why should I leave? I like being alone." She looked down at her child as if the breath of the world coming through the open door would blight him.

"Don't you think, Esther, you should consider your son in coming back?" He paused for her entirely to grasp this before he added, "It must happen sometime, you know."

She caught his inference immediately. "I understand," she said faintly. "You think it best for people to get used to me as soon as possible . . . Yes, the world must get used to me."

"Don't put it that way, Esther. I only suggest that you take your place in it. You will . . . one day."

She held her face close to the baby's and sighed. "You're right, Mr. Orme. I should take my place as the mother of Dion . . . the sooner the better." She rose and Orme saw she was prepared for immediate action. He realized that because of her extraordinary capacity for converting thought into deed, conversation with her was a grave responsibility. "If I don't go now every one will think I am afraid or ashamed of Dion. . . . I'm not. Dion and I were so happy that I wanted to remain here with him and my work. . . . Now I see my doing so was very selfish."

Robert watched her make preparations to go into

the streets. Understanding the moral climate of the village, he would have had her postpone her first appearance in Freedom; but her courage thrilled him. He walked to the gate with her, the baby cooing in her arms. She swayed a little as she moved. Catching her breath she offered this explanation: "I haven't walked much before."

"I don't think I'd go to-day," he urged anxiously. "I really didn't mean you should do that. You're not strong enough, Esther. Remain at home a few days longer, and then come up to one of my talks. You can go into the village any time."

Grateful for his tenderness, still she persisted: "No, I may as well make the start now. If I don't, they'll say I'm a coward. If I am one, Dion will be influenced by it . . . and so we both must go."

Robert said good-by, but he did not go away. He remained watching Esther as she plunged into the doubtful medium of the village—a magnificent, untrammelled spirit predestined to follow her largest vision. There was no pillory in Freedom, but the forebears of the inhabitants of the hamlet had lived under Connecticut Blue Laws; had branded with hot irons and hanged by the neck until dead such unhappy culprits as Esther Damon. As the woman went her way it was the blood of those Puritans that looked and spoke. It spoke when Mrs. Snead—the moral Gibralter of the town—an open Bible before her, seated at the window, called to her husband, "Snead, come here, Snead." The deacon apparently responded to the summons. The next words whirred

into Esther's ears, "Well, if she ain't what I call brassy."

How the world could hurt! It seemed to Esther as if she could never raise her head again. Just then the baby stirred, smiled, and looked up at his mother with wide blue eyes. And love gave her courage to go on with head uplifted. Freedom, like the larger world, lied about its sins, hid them, strangled them, did all but face them. This girl took refuge in none of these moral obliquities, but with calm courage appeared in the streets, her unlawful offspring in her arms, as if he had a right to be. Such conduct astonished the inhabitants and filled them with terror much as if a beast of prey had burst from its cage, and athirst for the blood of innocence, with her savage young roamed the quiet, shaded thoroughfares. Esther recognized the hostility in the atmosphere. It was difficult for her to breathe this heavy, poisonous air. The young girls she met strolling hatless, arm in arm, as in the old days she had walked with them, cast furtive glances at her. Their whispered comments were like a loud outcry.

She entered the post-office, asked for letters—sometime she must do this, why not now?—The clerk smiled at the oddity of Esther's assumption. Block by block she advanced, occasionally touching her baby's head with her lips. Just as she reached the corner on which stood Wherritt's store she saw, pausing near the watering trough, Lucy Yates, in a stiffly starched pink dress. What a world had come between her and Lucy. Esther wondered if her

friend had forgotten the years they had played together. With a sweet, silent greeting, Esther recognized Lucy in the distance. At this the terrified little maiden forgot her pretty manners and protestations. Her one thought was how to avoid her school-fellow. Lucy plainly reasoned that Esther either would enter Wherritt's or follow the direct way to the farther end of the village. So she beat a disconcerted flight across the street to Spear's.

Esther realized that after so great a violation of the community laws as her own, it was foolish to count on the devotion of her friends. But Lucy's defection showed her in how many ways she could suffer. She determined never again to speak to any one in Freedom. When some of the loungers at the corners saluted her, she gave no sign of observing them.

The large rambling white residence of Dr. Yates had always been like a second home to Esther. Before it she encountered a kindly voice, that of the physician, who emerged from the well-cared-for garden. As he took his place in his carriage he bade her "good evening"; but already she had begun to live as if she inhabited another universe. Dr. Yates would not allow her to pass. He got down from the vehicle, hastened after Esther, took her hand and said, "Come, Esther, I'm not going to allow you to do that. I'm your friend. You must always remember it." Her silent, quivering lips were her answer. "I tell my wife and Lucy we are not cannibals, but we all behave as if we were. I'd like to have them go to see you."

"Thank you," she said, as she went on, unable to utter more.

She walked to the outer rim of the village, crossed the road, and, trembling, came back on the side of the tavern. Avoiding that would have been to abandon part of her heroism, to admit that she and her son had no right to pass before the place where Dion's father lived. She heard the click of the billiard balls at the Ivy Green. The sound stirred in her apprehension that Harry would see her, see his son, and seeing him in all his precious beauty, would desire to contend with her for possession of him. This unsophisticated thought caused the mother to startle the child with the violence of her embrace until a long, strange wail echoed through the open space of the Four Corners, filled them and the twilight with horror. "Hush, Dion!" she whispered, "Hush." But already the weird, primitive shriek had pierced the ears of the loiterers. They showed themselves at the entrance of Clancy's, Wherritt's, Spear's, Hood's—a great composite countenance in which amusement, revulsion, and ferocity were so unmasked that a spectator might have felt that the village had sinned more than Esther Damon.

Slowly she came back, as if walking in treacherous, boggy mire. With every step she realized anew the pressure of the hard, accepted laws of life. Home once more. Orme, still waiting, stood motionless, held by amazement, admiration and fear for her.

"I never thought you'd finish it," he said in awe, however did you, Esther?"

"Perhaps I never could," she answered as with a last flicker of strength, "if you hadn't taught me . . . what you have."

"Ah, no," he replied, "some things can't be taught."

CHAPTER XXIV

After their first startling appearance, Esther Damon and her child no longer occasioned confusion when they showed themselves in the village. Immaculate matrons and maidens were surprised that the offender addressed none and expected no greetings. Nor did she try to seduce the unspotted from their ways of virtue. She wished to exist alone with her son. Soon the mother and child became an unreal picture floating through the town. But while the lambs and doves were in a measure habituated to the sight of Esther and the evidence of her sin, the sinner stood out against the white background of their own purity as the object of most lurid interest in the annals of the village.

Every evening, in her determination that Dion should, from the beginning, take his place in the world on the same plane with other children more happily born, Esther walked with the large, blue-eyed, healthy boy in her arms. In her endeavor to avoid the hurt of eyes without tenderness or charity, the mother seldom looked up from Dion's face, but there were felicitous moments when she fancied a stranger smiled upon her son. With a fond, quickening throb of the spirit she saw her baby compel recognition for himself. Ah, it would come to that! They must all love him as she loved him.

During one of her evening strolls she paused before the Freedom Academy building. In that formal structure she had skimmed lightly the surface of life. The sight of the school-house door unlatched a wide vision for the future of her son. Here Dion should go to school. But on reflection she thought it wiser that he be kept from others of his own age lest, while too young to accept the truth, he should be saddened by the stain of his mother. She herself would teach him until Orme could take up his education. In the meantime, how she would work! Esther had been thwarted in a desire to go to college; but what self-denial she would make that at the earliest possible age her son might enter the university where Robert had taken his degree. Even this did not satisfy the maternal ambition. Soaring with her fancy, Esther traversed the sea to another more renowned institution of learning. Under the spell of her vision she walked slowly onward into the country; and—why not abandon herself to the dream?—in the rosy vista of the years she saw herself cross the ocean with Dion. Drifting thus in a fantastic medium she smiled, and smiled as she mused.

By degrees, however, her dreams were interrupted by the consciousness of a shadow that rose and fell, drew near, paused, and then retreated. Some one was following her noiselessly, as a hunter creeps after a bird. Esther walked on slowly. Advancing, she noticed a familiar sound in the foot-fall, a sound once heard by her in a half swoon of delight. Yes, she was being pursued, and by the man whose name

she had not spoken, which none had mentioned in a twelvemonth. In the early days sometimes she had felt she must make an outcry of his name in the street; that if only once without restraint she might utter it, her tension would be relieved. But she had choked it down until it was suffused throughout all her being. She wondered if his name were not also in the blood of Dion; if the child did not quicken at the approach of his father. So inveterate an idealist was she, and so inaccessible to realization of the baseness which had destroyed her, that often there had risen in her the desire to seek him, to make a sign to him, to speak a word with him of their son. Now here he was. She stood still, as she invited his approach.

"Esther!" Yes, that was his voice. It yet had for her an agitating charm; it belonged to him who led her into a wonderful garden of romance. "Esther!" He was now quite close at her heels. She listened. No note of tenderness was in the tone. No echo of love lingered in the voice. She turned her head not a hair's-breadth to see him. After so long a delay, he himself must come every inch of the way. Her one thought was the fear that he wanted Dion. She tightened her embrace of the child and waited.

Clancy was not embarrassed, nor confused, nor humbled, as he stood in Esther's presence. Nature had protected him at his birth. He was non-moral. All discomposure was for her. She must still continue to pay. In the first glance she saw her lover as he was; saw more than the pleasing contour of the handsome face; saw the meaning in the beau-

tiful, cruel, womanish lips, in the self-indulgent, protrusive, blue eyes. Though there was no reflection of a lingering afterglow of love in his gaze, Esther discovered there a premeditated endeavor to re-exert his old charm. But this effort collapsed into clumsiness.

A sudden horror of him possessed her. She had desired him to see the child; but now she wanted nothing so much as to separate her son from his father. Dion's gold hair and blue, flower-like eyes seemed to be entirely of her own dreams, of her own heart beats, of her own flesh and blood. Clutching her child in a sudden fear of losing him, she started forward. The baby wailed in terror. Clancy hurried by her side, saying, "Esther, don't run away. I've wanted to talk with you for a long time. You know how hard it is in a place like this to see any one without its getting out. But I had to meet you."

She paused to listen. The offence she had feared was some fancied claim of Clancy's upon the child. Now she saw him oblivious, careless of her son's presence. Then something within her died. Her garden of romance withered under the touch of reality. Harry was as far removed from her as one of the beasts gazing at them over the fence.

"What is it?" she asked with a show of impatience. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

In spite of her tone, chilled with irony, his smile of gratitude came. "You mean, Esther, I'm always after you to do things for me."

"No," she returned, re-experiencing the old fer-

ment of horrors and suffering, "I mean nothing except hurry, hurry . . . and have it over with."

"I guess, Esther, I always do ask things of you. That's because you're such a nice girl. You never would ask anything of me. If you had, things would have been different. Why didn't you tell me? I didn't intend that. . . . It was pretty bad."

Esther shuddered as he endeavored to place her in the wrong and establish himself as a well-meaning, nobly-inclined individual. Determined as she always had been never to thrust herself upon Harry as a sacrifice, she shook the tears back into her eyes and said, "Have I ever complained?"

"No, Esther, no, you never did."

"Wait until I do before you talk about the past," she answered, with indignation which saved her from a flood of emotion. "What do you want?"

"I shouldn't speak of it to you, Esther," he stammered, realizing that the moment was not his, "but you were always such a sweet girl. You might have made a lot of trouble . . . you didn't . . . I know you'll help me." He touched surer ground as he proceeded. "I don't know how you feel after all this time . . . but you used to like me. I don't believe you want to worry me now." He paused and looked down at the ground. "Things aren't pleasant at home . . . You can help me out if you will."

"What can I do?" she asked quietly, looking at the child.

"Well, Esther," he said, with the awkward manner

of one who rarely attacks a difficult situation, "it's like this, Esther. Every time you pass the hotel, the fellows joke me about it." He hesitated and then went on, "I don't mind it so much—a man must give and take—but," he endeavored to touch her arm, as if that assisted him to make his point. "Every time you appear my wife goes off into a faint. She raises an awful fuss. I'll leave Freedom if I have any more of this kind of trouble. What I want to ask is . . . if you won't please stop carrying the baby round town every day."

She raised her eyes. Her glance hushed him as he endeavored to proceed, "I hope——"

She shook herself loose from him, and quickly turned toward the village. But it seemed that something of his corruption adhered to her, something she could never throw off. Did one hour bury another? Could she never advance beyond what was gone? Would the past always creep after her as he had come?

"Now, Esther," Harry said, pursuing her, "don't go to see my wife, will you? You're sensible and reasonable . . . Don't make a row after being so nice. Listen, Esther," he added, endeavoring to arrest her hurrying steps. "Don't go back till we've had this thing out. Stop right here . . . Promise me if you must walk you'll go in another direction."

She had heard enough, too much. Her shame choked in her throat. Rage of a sort she had never dreamed of shook her. Oh, to have the strength to be a murderer and see his blood run out drop

by drop! She tried to speak, but passion made her dumb. After what seemed a long time, but was really only a moment, her voice came in a queer, grating whisper, "Don't you understand I'm this child's mother?"

She ran toward the town, her head sunken to that of her child, fleeing as though from desolation, madness, darkness, and death.

"Esther!" came another voice. She looked up. There was Orme.

He did not know what had passed between her and Clancy, but she seemed as if huge, brutal hands had crushed her. White of lip and cheek, Robert stood staring after Harry, and Esther realized how men look when they lunge at each other's throats. Orme turned his glance to her, a glance which concealed much, revealed much. "Let me do something for you . . . everything. I don't care what it is, Esther."

"Forget what you have seen this evening," was her answer as she went on.

CHAPTER XXV

Mrs. Brewster was standing at the gate when Esther returned to the house. "You can never guess who's waiting for you."

"My mother?" the girl questioned in alarm.

Lucy Yates came to the screen door. "Esther! Esther!" she cried. Mrs. Brewster held the baby while Esther and Lucy embraced like two long separated lovers. They hugged each other, they wept, they laughed. Lucy spoke first: "I've always wanted to come . . . always, but mamma, poor old dearest, is afraid of everything. Papa and I had our way. You ought to have heard Robert Orme talk, too. I never saw you, but I wanted to touch your hand and tell you I still loved you. No one could make me believe you were bad and horrid and terrible."

"I'm so glad you came to-night," Esther said, caressing Lucy. "I need you . . . so much. I'm rich . . . I've a new friend."

"I'm going to stay all night with you, Esther, just as I used to in the old days," said Lucy. And she did. They could not waste time in sleep, and so they talked until dawn.

Shortly after Lucy's departure, the following morning, Robert appeared in Mrs. Brewster's sitting-

room, took a seat by Esther's loom, watched the gladness and gratitude in her eyes as she told him of her friend's return. Esther guessed the hours of struggle he and the physician had had with Mrs. Yates to obtain her consent to Lucy's visit. Mrs. Brewster came into the room. "Sit down, Aunty," he said.

"No, I never loll around and twirl my fingers in the forenoon," she replied.

"Please do," he insisted. "I'd like to talk with both you and Esther."

Mrs. Brewster compromised by seating herself on the lounge and sewing rags for a carpet. "Fire ahead," she said.

"I'm going to buy back the old home," Orme announced.

"You be!" Mrs. Brewster pricked her finger with her needle. "Well, you are a smart boy. I tell you what, you'll make these folks squirm yet."

Esther turned in her chair as Orme gave the news. Her eyes expanded wide. She laid a felicitating hand upon his. "I'm so glad for you. Everything will come to you because you are so good to others. I hope you will grow very rich."

He laughed. "That isn't what I'm trying for," he said. "No one is good enough to be rich. I want to make things right with you and Aunty Brewster and all who have worked for me."

Neither of the women understood. "What do you mean by making things right?" Esther asked.

"I have several thousand dollars in the bank at

Ripon," Robert explained. "It's all profit from your work. I've cheated you."

Mrs. Brewster laid aside her sewing. "Oh, you get out, Bobby. You've paid me twice as much as any one else ever did."

"Nevertheless I have cheated you," Robert held out. "Oh, it was legal cheating, but if I paid you what you really earned I should have had no more than you. I didn't. I am very well off while those who created my bank account are poor. I was at best a parasite, and at worst a thief. Now I'm going to give the money all back to you who made it."

Mrs. Brewster allowed her rags to fall in a heap. "You're crazy, plumb crazy! What book did you get all them ideas out of?"

"Life," Robert explained. "I was a laborer for a year. I saw my employers profit by my work. They were on the way to being rich men. After I established the factory, every day I realized I was robbing the people who worked for me. I tried to teach them, to give them short hours, high wages, the use of my house; but paternalism doesn't satisfy. My property is all theft. I've come to ask you in what form you would like your share returned."

"Oh, Mr. Orme," Esther replied, "I've had my share. Every one has, and more. You've made so many of us happy. You've brought lots of money to Freedom. Think of all you've done for the village."

Robert was a little scornful as he repeated, "*Done*

for the village. I've robbed it. I have a bank account of ill-gotten gains to prove it."

"But you've been so kind to every one," Esther argued. "No one has done so much."

"Perhaps I haven't been quite so brutal in my money-getting as some others, but I robbed you just the same. I can't go back to living on workmen. If you're all agreed, we'll buy the old place together as community property. We'll turn the cabins on the hill into shops. My wife and I will move over to the brick house, but it will belong to you as much as it does to us. Everything will be incorporated under the name of the Republic, a real democracy—not a warmed-over aristocracy with money as king. We shall all be citizens of the Republic if you like, but I'll not coerce any of you to join us. You may take your choice," he said, including both Mrs. Brewster and Esther, "between citizenship in the Republic and having your share of the money and working for wages."

Aunty Brewster shook her head as if this plan of Robert's were a new kind of whiskey, but Esther lifted to him a charming smile as she said, "It's splendid. I understand your idea now. You're trying to make life as it should be. I want to be a citizen of the Republic."

"I'm glad of that," he said, clasping her hand gratefully. "One of the cabins shall be yours. When the orchards and the lands are properly cared for, your living will cost you nothing. In a world of abundance no one should worry about the future."

"It's a crack-brained scheme, Bobby," offered Mrs. Brewster. "I did think you was getting horse-sense, but there ain't much horse-sense outside of Massachusetts. If you're bent on giving away the money you honestly made out of carpets and furniture, I guess I might as well have my share of the—what do you call it?"

"The Republic," he answered.

"Republic sounds all right," returned the widow, "but I don't want none of your democracies. Democrats are all copperheads. What does Alice say to this notion of yours?"

"Alice!" he exclaimed. He and she lived in countries so alien in thought that he sometimes forgot she was his wife. "Oh, I haven't told her."

While Robert worked that morning it frequently occurred to him that he dreaded telling Alice about the Republic. Since his domestic life turned a somersault, by skilled piloting he had avoided the black rock of dissension toward which they seemed always to drift. As he joined her at the mid-day meal he wished the hour were over. He began disclosing his plans by saying that he had purchased the old home, and they would return there within a week.

"You are queer, Robert, but you are smart," Alice said, for the first time in years giving him her full approval. "I'll be so glad to leave the cabin. You don't know what I've suffered here."

"I'm sorry. I've been very happy," he returned. "I shall regret leaving. This house has been my own work, and I've enjoyed it immensely. I'd like

to remain in the cabin if it weren't so well suited to being a shop."

"How funny you are, Robert." Alice's manner showed indulgence for the eccentricities of success. "I've higher ideas than yours. I'm never satisfied unless I'm at the very top. I'll be so glad to get away. I intend giving a church social as soon as I get into the house. You must take off those every-day clothes and come. You simply must, Robert. And won't you try to be polite to Brother Duane? You always treat him as if you'd like to run away when he calls here. If you'll only go to church with me next Sunday, I'll feel like holding up my head once more and letting people know I'm a great deal more than those who've been feeling sorry for me because I live in a log house."

He listened as if she were a child prattling of games. "Enjoy your social, Alice, but I'm afraid you can't count on me. What you make a god is my devil. I shall be too busy to go. And please don't ask me to listen to the Baptist minister. I want to read and study Sundays instead of going to church. Why bother about conventional religion? If religion isn't a hinge for conduct, it's superfluous. Christianity seems to me so different from the teachings of Jesus."

"I knew it," Alice retorted. "Pa said the day we were married you had no stability. I never can be any one in Freedom so long as people say you are an infidel, and you never think or do anything that any one else in Freedom does."

Orme laughed somewhat bitterly. "I can't do things or think them or like them because Freedom does. That's too great a price for being what you call 'somebody.' I've no ambition, Alice, to be anybody in Freedom if it means doing as Freedom does." He added in another key, "I wish I could show Freedom how to do better——"

"Much good you can do Freedom," she sputtered, "when you have around you the lowest set in town."

"You don't realize, perhaps, Alice," he interrupted, setting down his coffee cup with a frown, "that you're speaking of my friends."

"You ought to be ashamed of such company. You don't care how many snubs I get because you have old O'Shea, the jail-bird, as head man in the furniture shop."

Orme shook his head despairingly. "Will people never forget that? I took O'Shea and Mearns when no one would have them. We've stuck together, and we've founded the Republic."

"What is the Republic?" Alice asked, as if her husband had led her to the gate of a mad-house and opened it.

"We are all citizens of it, partners—all of us who work in the factory. The land and shops are to be owned by all, and operated for all."

Breakfast no longer had savor for Alice. She moved her chair from the table. "You've taken in all the scum of Freedom as partners, Robert?" When there was no denial she moaned angrily, "I knew I could never be any one. It seems to me,"

she argued, "you've been good enough to these people without giving everything we have to such trash."

He explained to her in full his plan. He refused to coin into money the youth and strength of his employees, to dull their minds and cast them off. The only way to do away with unhappiness and crime was by doing away with poverty and furnishing equal opportunity. He told her he could not play with his belief; he must live his ideals.

Alice sat unmoved. "Of course you have no idea, Robert, that I'm going to give *my* half of our money for any such purpose."

The dart struck home. With amusement she recognized that he had forgotten she was his legal partner. As the fact pierced Orme's mind, with it came the fear of a delay in the formation of the Republic. His disappointment was cruel. If Alice could have awaited Robert's response she would have shown greater discretion. Instead, her prompt words were like a neigh of battle. "I'm the only person you don't seem to mind robbing and depriving of a home."

Orme looked at his wife, lighted a cigar, let it go out, rose and walked about the room. "Then, Alice, you don't want to be a citizen of the Republic. I had assumed that you would. I made a mistake." He looked at her steadily. "What do you prefer?"

Her response had the lack of impulse of a well-regulated cash register: "My half of the money, if you don't mind."

Then he laughed. "Of course. I should have known that before." Again he laughed. "I was foolish not to have understood it. You shall have every cent." His affability was denunciation. "I shall be able now to buy only part of the land, but I hope the rest will come later. I'll try any way. I'm sorry you don't like the idea. I had hoped it would interest you."

"You mean to tell me you're going on with this crazy plan, Robert?"

He no longer laughed. "Alice," he said slowly, with insistence on each word, "you may have half the money earned by these men. I think it belongs to them, but it is yours. You may always live in the house of the Republic, and of course my share of that community property will be yours. Let's settle it so and not discuss it any more."

"I know what pa will say about this." Alice's citation of authorities in Freedom was always exasperating. Ira Wherritt in a judicial capacity was too heavy a test of Robert's patience. "He always said there never was an Orme yet who knew enough to keep a penny. Your grandfather emancipated all his slaves for some wild idea. You're no business man."

Each sentence came as a messenger of provocation. Orme was surprised at his own moderation. "You surely don't want me to be a business man, Alice, if it means preying on others. In an advanced state of civilization the business man of to-day would be as ashamed of his occupation as a burglar or

pickpocket now is of his. I'll not profit by a system of robbery even though legalized and established."

The wings of Alice's mind always took a direct flight to the ultimate. "And are you goose enough to think you're going to succeed?"

"It depends upon what you mean by success."

"Do you think it will last?"

"It doesn't matter whether it lasts until my death and then fails, or whether it breaks down even within a year or so. I'll offer what I have in protest against the accepted commercial system. If my work gives a flash of right impulse to some one else it will be successful. I don't hope for much. Perhaps I shouldn't expect greater success than to restore to each man and woman in the Republic their just share of the proceeds of their toil."

"Woman!" Alice's surprise was too big for her vocabulary. "Woman!" Now they crashed on the inevitable rock. "Oh, that is what it's all about—justice and ideals and that nonsense. Why, they're merely Esther Damon."

Alice's truths were like those of a child, undraped and direct. She watched Orme's pale face for signs of their effect. To her intense scrutiny his dark, staring eyes seemed to resemble those of Esther Damon. "You've been weak enough to be tempted by that woman." Then she summed it up with the opinion, "Men are all alike."

A picture of Esther as he had last seen her rose before Orme's vision. "You quite misunderstand

Esther Damon. You're judging meanly. She's been wretchedly unhappy and unfortunate; but she's not base. If I insisted on kindness being shown her, or over-urged her cause it was because others showed so little pity. It remained to me. How could I help it?" he continued, with a calmness he did not feel. "She's the best weaver in the Republic. She has created several new designs. Why should I discriminate against Esther Damon?"

Alice received the name as a symbol of insult. "I'd like to know, Robert Orme," she demanded, with such rapidity that her words sounded like the clicking of a telegraph instrument, "if you have any morals at all, or if you think I have any? Do you mean to tell me if that woman takes it into her head to come into my house she may? Is that what you do in your Republic?"

"Why not?" he replied, now more surely master of his feelings. "The house belongs to the Republic, and she'll be a citizen of it."

"I'd like to see her try to enter it. Mrs. Brewster shouldn't have taken her in at all."

"Don't blame Aunty Brewster. I asked Aunty to give her a home." Now that Orme had begun, he was determined Alice should realize the entire extent of his responsibility. "Esther Damon won't trouble you. She'll live on this side of the road, where all the weavers are to be."

Alice held her ground. "I stand or fall right here. Esther Damon shall never live in any of these cabins or have a room here."

"Don't say that, Alice. Why be so hard on her? She's a poor victim."

"Poor victim! I suppose if I had run away and disgraced myself and my family, I'd be a poor, lovely victim. Because I'm decent, nobody has any interest in me."

"You would be an entirely different person to do such a thing," Robert argued as he approached his wife. "And because you are so different, can't you show Esther Damon a little kindness? Why not make her feel now and then that she isn't entirely friendless? I imagine she has a great many sad days."

"She should have thought of them before. She can't expect good women to know her. The churches have done their duty by her—they have prayed for her."

Orme frowned. "Yes, they pray for her, I suppose. But who will walk down town with her? Jesus' religion ought to be introduced into the churches. He would have taken her into His home."

There was an eloquent silence which Alice broke as she said impressively, "There's a very big difference between you and Jesus, Robert."

"But how," Orme asked, "can the good help the bad by living only with the good? Nothing cures hearts except other warm hearts laid upon them."

"You wouldn't have me *know* Esther Damon?" To the wife the possibility was grotesque.

"Perhaps you know worse women——"

"Worse?"

"Yes, women who lie about one another, perjure and prostitute themselves to marry for a home or money, and then cheat their husbands of affection and consideration. They have marriage certificates, but they are the bad characters to avoid. If you say to women who criticise you for knowing Esther Damon that she broke only one commandment and pays for it every day, while most of them have broken several and pay nothing because they are protected by the marriage trust, you'll do some good. You'll be a missionary, teaching women a little common honor in their marital relations."

Every word of Orme's indignation Alice knew was levelled at her. "I admit I'm a low person," she mockingly stipulated, "but I'm not quite low enough to have that creature in the house."

"Her work has given her the right here," he answered quietly, as if fearing his own utterance.

"Even if it has, if she ever sets foot in this cabin to live, you lose me, and you lose the respect of every one in Freedom."

Orme raised his voice as he leaned forward in his chair. "If with a clear understanding of what it means, Alice, you demand this injustice of me—an injustice that would make me contemptible, you lose me; this time for the rest of our lives. I believe I lost you long ago. I'm not sure you ever belonged to me. Did you? Or did you marry that house over there? Can you honestly say I ever counted so much as that pile of bricks? Would you have married me if I had been without it?"

It was the least of Alice Orme's ambition to be mistaken for a sentimentalist. To concede that her husband outweighed his possessions would have been a confession to a lack of balanced judgment. Her reply to Robert's question was to pelt him with a few last illuminating phrases as she marched toward the door: "I'll not ask you to be unjust to Esther Damon. Stay here on this side of the road where she's to be. I'll live in the other house. I'm going over there, but don't imagine that even if I don't read books, I don't know what the real matter is with you. You don't realize it, but I do think occasionally. Sometimes when you've sat looking as if you'd lost every friend and I wanted to have fun I mentioned her name. That was enough. You talked and talked as if you were speaking about an angel. I've played the joke on you a dozen times and watched you be a donkey. You may be deceiving yourself; you're not deceiving me. . . . You're in love with her. That's all. That's your Republic."

Alice peered into Robert's face to observe the effect of her words, to see them work like deadly poison in his mind. However, few symptoms of his malady were revealed. He walked across the room, then turned and looked at her as at one who unknowing plays with grave, high words. He waited for her to go on, as she did: "But you won't call it love—oh, no! You'll have some fine, grand name for it. It would be friendship, soul-harmony, affinity, even if you were Brigham Young. You'll

never recognize it for what it is." He stared at her blankly. "Don't you know it yet?" She laughed furiously. "I'll prove it to you." She went to the chimney-piece, took up the little picture made by Esther Damon. "Look at this! It's the only picture you would have in the house, isn't it?"

He did not answer. "You thought I didn't know where it came from. I heard Mrs. Damon say Esther made it. You kept it there where you could always look at it. Well, you'll never look at it again."

Robert perceived her intention before she began rending the cardboard. "Put it down," he cried, as he sprang forward and seized her wrists.

It was too late. The picture was torn into pieces. "You're hurting my wrists," she said. He released her, and she threw the fragments of cardboard into his white face. "Now you know."

Yes, his wife had made all clear to him. Now he knew. He tried no longer to evade the truth. He wished to proclaim it to Alice and the world. From the first day when Esther Damon's face had stirred him to better endeavor he had loved her. Her struggles, her suffering, her persecution, her courage, every hour of her presence had endeared her to him until his love was his ruler. He stooped to pick up the bits of the cardboard which had always seemed a part of her. His fingers trembled. How dared Alice destroy this symbol of his love!

"You hate me now," she said, alarmed that she had gone so far.

"Go back to your father's home, and never return here," he answered, no longer endeavoring to be calm.

"I'll not," she answered. "You only want me to leave so you can see Esther Damon."

She went no farther. His fearful anger silenced her. "Don't mention Esther Damon's name. There is no house large enough for you and me to live in again."

Alice looked at him a long time. She had never seen him before in this state of mind. She recognized the finality of his fury. She crossed the room in leave-taking and touched the lapel of her husband's coat. Orme shuddered. He feared some word of apology from her. "I'm going to my father," she said, "but don't forget you're my husband. You belong to me. You shall always belong to me. I'll live just to keep you from her."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE return of Alice Orme to her father's house surprised no one. Freedom had always wondered how long the apparent domestic happiness of the Ormes would last. But the Four Corners were puzzled by the Republic. Moderate greed was their symbol of respectability. A bank account was a bank account. Dividing money with workmen looked like lunacy. Robert's deficiency in property sense indicated his loose moral fibre. "What could be the matter with him?" the Four Corners asked one another.

"Whiskey, of course," answered Job Spear.

"Women!" explained Ira Wherritt with a wink. In order not to lose an entire half day's work, the old man rose early one morning, and drove to Ripon to request a lawyer to have a custodian appointed to take charge of Orme's small fortune. Wherritt's visit was fruitless. He returned to Freedom lamenting that the sacredness of dollars was not sufficiently safeguarded by the law. He guessed anarchists would be running things pretty soon.

For many months Robert's love for Esther had been a hidden dream of his soul. After Alice revealed to him its power, at no moment was he entirely free from longing for the girl. As his love

increased he sometimes thought he could see it written in his face. He dreaded lest others should read it there. Away from Esther he idealized her; in her presence he feared lest he should betray himself. At times he thought he would try to forget her. Then he would not if he could; his love made him too unutterably happy. But when he prefigured the years of silence he must pass without her, life became unendurable. For the first time he hesitated before public opinion. He seldom went to Mrs. Brewster's house; he wished to shield Esther. He could not give her as food to the gossips.

But in spite of him the gossips were busy. Alice had told. Mrs. Brewster forbade Esther to go to live in the cabin on the hill, offering as a reason that she was a regular old softy about Dion. The widow declared she would mope herself to death without him. Esther promised to remain with Aunty Brewster, but she suspected that the old lady's brusque, affectionate concern screened a pretext. She wondered why Orme never lingered to chat, why he so often came when she was absent. Perhaps he was sad because he had separated from his wife. She found herself glad that he was alone; it was as he lived when they first met. Yet she reproached herself for pleasure in anything that caused him pain. By a great tug at the will she tried to say she regretted the change in his life.

One afternoon in the late autumn she went on an errand for Mrs. Brewster. Returning she met Orme

at the gate. "Oh," she exclaimed, her eyelids trembling as she gave him her hand. His face was graver than usual. Evidently his wife's departure had meant much to him. "You never come to see us any more," she said.

"We've been building new cabins, moving into the old building," he replied, "but I was just coming to see you now. I'm tired of being in the factory. Let's walk under the trees."

They stepped into the orchard. Her narrow, deep life widened. She always seemed a larger being when near him. For her walking by his side was an adventure. Youth returned again and she knew she was young. She rushed forward breathlessly, following no path through the valley, living thoughtlessly, intensely, with the great free things of nature. He could hardly keep pace with her. "How fast you walk," he said, fearing some subtle betrayal of his love even in this commonplace remark. His hammering heart made him realize that their separation had been over-long. Esther had been too frequently in his thoughts for him to be natural when with her, but he struggled on, "This is the first time you have walked through the orchards of our Republic . . . yours and mine . . . and the others." Despite himself a new cadence came into his tone.

"Not mine," she corrected. "I've been wanting to tell you I can't accept your kindness. I'll live at Aunty Brewster's. I'd rather work as a wage-earner."

He brushed aside her sadly embroidered little lie. "I'll not listen to your desertion. You've always been frank with me before. Life is too short for make-believe between us."

"I know," she promptly said. When Esther was with him she was more charming, more beautiful, more entirely herself. Then her entire being seemed illumined. "I don't understand why I hesitate . . . or what it is I don't say . . . but I oughtn't to go. I'm not wanted in the Republic."

Delaying their steps, they lingered face to face. "Who is wanted if you are not?" he quietly asked.

"Every one, I think. . . . You've been embarrassed by me, you've had trouble on account of me. . . . I can't allow that. You must give me up." She did not notice his quick breathing which spoke louder than any syllable could speak. "When a woman goes . . . out of the beaten track, that's the kindest thing for her. I'm Dion's mother, nothing more." She raised her head aloft. "That's enough for any one. Let me work in the old way. There's no place for me in the Republic."

A torrent seemed shut in Robert's heart as in the evening quiet he replied. "Then there's no place in the Republic for me, Esther."

"You mustn't have discord because of me. I shall be unhappy if you suffer on my account."

He felt himself grow faint. "You are already one of us as long as the Republic lasts. Keeping you with us is . . . selfishness."

She shook her head. "No, you're trying to make

it easy for me. You're so kind you don't want to let me know how I've worried you. For two weeks I've seen you always walking alone up to the top of that high hill before us . . . I understand."

Orme wondered how much longer he could hold out. "Not everything, Esther. We all have our life we can't explain." She felt he was speaking of his wife. "You recall the Hill of Difficulty in Pilgrim's Progress. Lions growl at the top to try one's faith. At the left and right are danger and destruction. We can't avoid the Hill of Difficulty. I like to go straight to the top . . . I need to meet the lions." His eyes were resting on the hill-crest where once had stood an Indian fort. After a long pause he turned to her quickly. "Will you come with me now to the top, Esther?"

His voice startled her. She turned away. In the inflection of this simple request she caught something which was like "I love you. Do you love me?" There were blind and fatal forces in her. What if there existed the like in him? What if their friendship were a high, exalted pretext? "I must go back," she said in alarm.

"Don't," he pleaded, shaken by desire to tell her all the ache and longing in his heart.

"Aunty Brewster will wonder where I've gone . . . Dion is waiting for me." She went toward the house, but turned her head to say "Good-night." When she saw the pain in his eyes she felt certain she had misjudged him. Of course the Hill of Difficulty was his wife.

"I'm very lonely," he called after her. Again she caught a new rhythm in his tone, again she reproached herself for doubting him. Her own insatiable need of idolatries found strange cadences in every voice.

. . . . . .

The winter months convinced Esther that Robert had given himself to regret over losing Alice. She seldom saw him alone. When he came to Mrs. Brewster's he was ill at ease and restrained, and he hurried away. Even Aunty Brewster noticed. Once the widow reproached him. "Fools will be fools. What are you worrying yourself to death for over that Alice?" Esther grew to feel estranged from him, and avoided the community house, which was the old Orme residence. The previous winter she had lived with Robert's spirit through his books; but when he seemed so changed, she had little desire to read. Her finer intellectual life was transmuted into devotion to her son. Motherhood became her vocation.

And the Sabbath bells seemed always to call her to worship. At times she wished to go. Separated from Orme she felt a renewal of religious fervor. She prayed for his happiness; she prayed that he would come back and give her of his strength. She needed him. His absence always reminded her that he was not present.

One melting afternoon in March, after an hour out of doors, Esther found Dion ill. She sat holding him by the sitting-room coal stove all night,

watching him anxiously. At daybreak his face took on a great and sudden beauty. The child strangled to death in her arms. Dion had always seemed to his mother half divine. She could not believe he was gone. She clung to his body as if to protect it from an invisible monster threatening to absorb it. His flesh was still hers. He seemed struggling to return to her.

"I once lived for you, Dion," she whispered. "Now come back to me . . . I can't go on alone. I can't. Don't leave me, my baby!"

Esther stirred the fire, wrapped Dion in a heavy quilt, trying to keep the heat in his body; but it grew chill and rigid. Half distraught she opened her dress, pressed his face against her breast, held her lips to his. As she huddled over the baby she grew cold and shivered. When Mrs. Brewster took the child from her, the universe seemed to crash upon the mother. With blank, blurred eyes she stared at the wall and stared and stared while the clock ticked the grimmest passages of Scripture into her mind. "The children of adulterers shall not come to maturity . . . if they live long they shall be held of no account." She could feel the syllables tramp through her head. Back and forth they marched. She would have struck them out of her consciousness, but the clock ticked them back again. She went into her room for escape.

She sank to the bed, flung out her arms and closed them on a great aching void. "Jesus, help me," she prayed. "I can't give my baby up." She

sought to feel a response from the Infinite. None came. Where was the mysterious, far-away Master? Where His promises? If only He would tell her whether Heaven was real, whether God was real. With merciless force the thought crushed her that she was God-estranged. But her sensibilities had been so deadened by pain that she could suffer no more. Exhausted by grief and lack of rest she slept.

When Esther woke she felt the warmth of the blankets with which Aunty Brewster had covered her. It was delightful to live. Then grief rushed over her. She could not endure the darkness of the room. She could endure no place where Dion was not. Only one more day would her son be hers. She must go to him. Perhaps she had only dreamed. Perhaps he was not dead. Perhaps he would open his eyes when she touched him. Throwing a shawl over her shoulders, she passed through the sitting-room where a fire always blazed in winter, and entered the parlor, which had the odor of apartments seldom opened. Hyacinths were in the air. On some chairs before a low melodeon near the door was Dion with pots of blooming calla lilies at his feet and a spray of hyacinths in his hand. She gazed at the lovely infant smile; at the white, wavy, silken head covered with a mysterious, impenetrable mask. She had not dreamed. He was dead. She knelt by his side and her lips moved in a last soundless appeal to be at one with him.

Even in her sorrow she wondered who had loved Dion enough to bring the flowers. She was sure

Lucy had come during the day; but the Yateses possessed no such blossoms. Only Robert did. Turning her head she saw what in the dim light had escaped her. Orme had come to watch, but he had fallen asleep on the couch. When did he ever fail her? To others Dion had been the incarnation of evil. To him the little, misbegotten life had every embodiment of good. She stepped softly toward Orme. When his face was animated he looked young, but now in repose the effort of his life showed. There were lines on either side of his mouth that might have been worn by dropping tears. Asleep on the sofa he was no longer her protector; he seemed only a child. In a wave of maternal tenderness she wished to take him in her arms. He was the one person living who responded to her entirely and she longed to talk with him; but knowing he was tired she did not speak. Her nearness woke him.

"Esther! Esther dear!" he said, sitting up quickly and taking her hand. For the moment he forgot that death had brought them together. There was a great, smothered happiness in his eyes. A dream of his had been that one day he might wake to find her bending over him so.

"Robert," she said, for the first time calling him by his Christian name, "I'm so glad you are here. You can help me."

After a pause he answered, "What can I do?"

"Cure me."

Had Esther's life always been bright and happy

she would not have been so dear to Orme. He loved her more for her disgrace, her suffering. His sins loved hers. He could not tell her of his great yearning to take her away to that emerald and gold country pictured by her fancy, to fill her life with love, to heal her soul. But he said, "I want to be everything to you. Remember . . . everything."

"Being with you is so much," she sighed, unmindful of how the words made his head whirl. "But even you can't make me forget I've lost Dion."

She looked at her son as the first mother looked at the first babe, and all within her suffered. The sight of her grief racked Robert. He covered her eyes with his hand. "Don't," he pleaded. There was a spell in his touch; but she walked toward the body of the child.

"Can you tell me that that is all I have of my baby?" she burst out.

His inquiry grappled with the same mystery. "What does any one know?" He led her back to the sofa. "We weren't intended to know. Dion experienced only happiness. He died in your arms . . . that is immortality."

Esther wrung her hands in suffering. "I can't forget I've lost him."

"You haven't, dear. He's free. You wouldn't bring him back, would you? Why, he's a butterfly out of his chrysalis."

"Yes, I would," she said, with the fierce resistance of youth. "I want him just as he was day

before yesterday. I want him to open his eyes and speak to me." She held her handkerchief over her mouth to subdue her shuddering. "But I wasn't good enough to keep him. He would be ashamed of me. God took him to punish me for my sins. God hates me. I feel it."

Orme was surprised to find that great grief had brought Esther close to belief in a personal God. "No, no!" he argued. "God isn't the monster you were taught to believe him to be. He's more merciful than men. We wouldn't punish cripples if we created them. Dion went because death is inevitable. We begin to die with our first breath. If death never came we should long for rest. He's only a little ahead of us. By and by, dear, your grief will soften, . . . you'll forget."

She stared over his shoulder at the white sheet. "How can I forget after once touching death?"

"Forgive me for always judging for you, Esther; but you'll forget its anguish. Think of death itself. Face it every day. Let it be a test of your courage."

She turned toward him. "Whatever you say seems true. Your thoughts are always new to me. I haven't many ideas. Yours help me." Her eyes looked into his as if they were the only light remaining for her guidance. "But what can I do now?"

"There's always something. After being so fine you mustn't break down. There's work."

Esther seized upon his words with swift questions. "Work? Work?" Then she moaned, "Who is there for me to work for, . . . Robert?"

"Freedom. Help sow seeds of humanity in this village. Then things will be easier for those who come after us." He took both her hands. His tone promised all one human being can do for another. "Work with the rest of us in the Republic."

"You can do that, Robert, but—" Her fingers dropped lifelessly to the patchwork cushion. "What influence have I? People despise me."

"I've been despised . . . you despised me."

"No, no!"

"Yes, I recall how frightened you were when you first saw me with the Wesley picture."

"No, no!"

"You got over it, but you were. That wasn't so long ago. Yet now you tell me that what I do matters."

Her nobly modelled head emphasized her words, "Ever and ever so much."

His utterance became difficult. "I appear always to speak of myself, but I don't see how I can avoid it. When I went to your home that day and you wrote me that you didn't think I was very wicked . . . I was. A hundred fiends within me were hidden from you. Since then every moment I stood off those devils. I have had to fight an army, and be laughed at and lied about while I fought." It was the first time he had ever given voice to his struggles. Esther looked at him through a blur. "Now it's easier. I was in the depths myself that night I found you down by the lake. I don't know

what would have become of me without you. Your bravery renewed mine. You see courageous acts don't die. They inspire others and increase the total sum of courage."

After a moment's hesitation she asked, "Isn't that true of wrong-doing also? Doesn't sin like mine produce an endless chain of evil?"

"I see no sin in you, Esther," he softly answered.

Under the long, slow strokes of his hand on her hair Esther's eyes grew drowsy; nature asserted its demands for repose. "Has death made all right, Robert?" she asked sleepily.

"No, your life did. You are a higher kind of truth and a braver kind of virtue than I've ever known."

"I am so wicked. . . . You make mistakes in judgment, Robert, but it's pleasant to hear kind words." Then she repeated in child-like gratitude, "I like to hear kind words." Reverting to her son, she said, "To-morrow they're going to take Dion away . . . Will you find a place for him, Robert? Not where the others are, but somewhere in the Republic. Let no one touch him but you. Perhaps some of the citizens of the Republic will help . . . the ground is frozen deep. Will you do that for me?"

Repose and tranquillity seemed to emanate from the tips of his fingers. "Anything you wish, Esther," he answered in a soothing tone. "Don't talk any more. Rest."

"I ask you always to do so much for me, Robert,"

she said, with half opened eyes, "but you're the only one I have . . . you're my one bright spot."

"We'll place him on the mound to the right of the Hill of Difficulty. Do you recall it?"

"Yes, Robert, there," she nodded. With Orme bending over her, death was less death. Tenderly he placed Esther's head upon the pillow Mrs. Brewster had given him for the night; then he covered her with the shawl. While mother and son slept, he kept a soundless vigil. So intense was her pallor, and so still was she that one might have believed the mother to be a beautiful, antique, marble figure of a woman stretched out on her own tomb.

CHAPTER XXVII

ESTHER DAMON passed through a dark period of revolt in which she acquainted herself with the desperate side of her nature. Her son's birth stirred in her sweetness and love; his death filled her with gall and hatred. Sometimes she carried in her breast a heart of stone; she cried out to her Maker that He was a murderer.

By slow degrees she emerged from this state of hard wrath; but bereavement had paralyzed her capacity for free thought. Esther's reason, so recently awakened by Orme, could not combat the influence of her father's instruction. She believed Dion had died to teach her how to live. Her spirit revived in her determination to pass her life as her son's mother should. Her hope was that one day when her purification should be perfected they might again be together. Faithful and brisk as were her hands at the loom, her existence now became subjective. She wove rainbows. She lived in the precious illusion that her child was struggling to return. Often Esther's consciousness took bold flight to worlds distant, distant as her son. In these large visions she saw herself the first to solve the great mystery. Mankind should at last wake with its eternal question answered. With shattering

intensity of soul throughout the long night hours she called to Dion as Mary Magdalene might have called at the tomb of the Man of Sorrows.

One evening, late, as she was about to extinguish the light, lamp still in hand, she paused to listen. There were footsteps on the board walk—experimental, inquisitive footsteps. Mrs. Brewster had gone to the Centennial Exposition, and their stealthy sound brought uneasiness. It was too late for Lucy to come. When Mrs. Brewster was not at home Orme intentionally remained away, and no others in Freedom disturbed the quiet of the house. Now came the slow, tentative tap of the intruder. Esther placed the lamp upon the table.

Before she opened the door she thought she had broken with the past; but before her was a survival. Anew it pressed against her in hideous intimacy. What she had never wanted to see again was here, and would remain so long as the love of Dion was rooted in her being. Silence held both her and Clancy. Esther in the inveterate habit of attributing to others her own shades of conscience, interpreted the motive for Harry's coming. The death of his son as an outcast had awakened some latent fineness in his nature. New tones of inner voices had stirred him to remorse. Yet reluctantly she bade him enter.

The width of the room was between them as she seated herself on the stool before the loom; but she longed to do something violent, to thrust her hands through the window pane for air. The odious dead

relation peered out of his eyes as with a fine display of candor he began. "Esther, I knew Mrs. Brewster had gone away, and so I came up to tell you I made a mistake. I know it."

After all she had misjudged him. At last they had identity of thought, and this for the child who was gone. She dropped a shuttle she had been nervously fingering, and awaited silently, gazing at him with the fixedness of eyes of wax. "It wasn't my fault," he blundered on, placing himself in a chair nearer her. "My people talked me into it. Maybe you don't believe that. I guess you think I'm pretty bad. Once before I started to explain, . . . you wouldn't listen."

There was a renewal of the old tones that made her shiver. "I don't care to listen now. Explanations are too late."

"But I want you to understand, Esther. Don't be cross," he pleaded. "My family were afraid I'd marry a Methodist. They always kept Stella around. She did seem a nice, pretty girl, and she was crazy about me." He did not heed the distress gathering in the listener's eyes. "But blonde angels are always selfish and cold-blooded. Stella never once thought about me."

"Don't," Esther entreated, as his redoubled treachery defined itself, "don't . . . talk about your wife."

"I must talk to some one, Esther."

Turning away her head she picked up the shuttle. "Don't talk to me. . . . Be faithful to some one."

He rose and laid his arm on the back of her chair. Esther's aspect quickly dislodged it. To the uncritical eye now he stood a handsome figure of youth. "I am faithful to some one. I know who. I've had enough of her and every other woman. They only make me realize how much nicer you are. She's gone home to her folks in a tantrum. I hope she stays. You're the one I want. I'm sorry I ever left you. You have real blood in your veins."

"No, no," she cried, in fright, "I'm not human for you."

Unconsciously she clutched the heavy shuttle. Clancy took upon himself all reprobation. "I don't blame you for being angry, Esther. I did behave like a dog; but I wasn't so bad as I seemed. I wouldn't have hurt you as I did . . . not for all of them, if you hadn't been so independent and proud. I'd have seen them all hanged before I'd have made you suffer for me. It wasn't my fault, Esther . . . I didn't know."

She stood up accusingly. "Is this what you have to say?"

"No, Esther," he broke forth, baffled in an endeavor to seize her hand, "I've a lot more. Get over being angry with me and . . . let's be sweethearts just as we were before."

With a wild savage thrill like a demon tearing at her throat, there leaped up within Esther anger she had never felt, and the passion for revenge that dominates the common being. She slipped from the high plane on which she had held herself secure, and

sank to his level. To hate, to crush, to destroy—a hundred malignant demons urged her as she stood impotently trembling in her majesty of hatred.

"Does nothing about me tell you," she sufficiently prevailed over herself to say, "that I'm another being? I feel nothing you feel. . . . I don't know what you're talking about."

Morally, Clancy was the aboriginal man. To see Esther thus, enlivened in him the full zest of pursuing a new intensified woman. Now he spoke with an ardor he had not known even when she first fell into his arms. "You imagine that; but people don't change, Esther." He looked at her, his eyes full of the past. "You haven't changed. You can't. I know. . . . We loved each other. Don't you remember that first day we sat under the pine tree? It rained everywhere but on us. For a long time we didn't say a word. Then I bent over and kissed your hair. When I looked at you, you seemed dizzy . . . I kissed you a dozen times. We knew we loved each other. I remember it so well, and every time we met in the forest. I always had to wait for you . . . it didn't matter. I was so glad to see you coming in the little gray bonnet you used to hate. You were so pretty and sweet. You can't think about those days and say you've forgotten, can you? You were my first sweetheart and I was yours."

Clancy spoke with all the tenderness and charm he had summoned in the old time; but Esther showed no response to the recital of the dawn of

their relation, save in her eyes, which widened as if she were re-living a hideous dream. "It never happened. . . . Why do you torture me? . . . I want to forget."

"You can't," his voice rang out as he seized her hand. "I won't let you. I'll make you remember. Let me try."

Once these words might have had a meaning for her; but now he was on the other side of a wide gulf. There was a frown on her fine boyish brow as she released herself from him. "I hate your love . . . I've done with life here . . . I'm perfectly content to live with the love of my son."

His hands fell limp. He let all his astonishment appear. "Why, Esther . . . Esther, you wouldn't have that boy back if you could?" Lighting a cigarette he shook his head and mused. "Women are funny. I don't understand them. . . . It was all for the best, Esther. Every one knew it. There wasn't a person in town that didn't breathe easier when that baby died."

With the horrible possibility of murder in her flaming eyes, in her heart, in her hands, in her trembling frame, Esther sprang toward Clancy. She was twice herself in strength; she had the strength of her love for her wronged son. Her tense, quivering fingers clutched Harry's throat. He staggered back against the loom. With an effort he freed himself from her death-grip and thrust her from him. Esther sank into a chair, a panting, tossing piece of driftwood of her own inner storm. Imme-

diately Clancy bent over her in tenderness. "I'm sorry, Esther." Straightening his cravat he smiled as if she were a charming fury. "I love you like that. It's the best thing about you . . . nothing half-way."

Her eyes were haggard and hollow as she raised her head. She gazed at him in a vain endeavor for utterance. When finally her words came they matched in tone the ghostly horror of her face. "Go. Never speak to me again . . . never come near me again. . . or there'll be an end to us both."

BOOK V

LOVE AND SOMETHING GREATER

". . . That unaccountable passion, of all things the most mysterious, the most terrible and the most divine, whereby bodies and souls are drawn to one another in defiance of all other affinities, be they interests or occupations or convictions, by an impulse so profound that it seems to have its source beyond the portals of life, so imperative that it overrides every other tie, so instinctive that it sweeps Reason like dust before its onset."—LOWES DICKINSON.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WHEN Esther first returned to the loom, it was solely because she had to earn a living; but as she toiled day after day the solace of her necessity was a new-found pleasure in the handiwork. Her imagination brightened as her fingers touched seductive surfaces of strands of silk dyed by her for hangings in the making. Exquisite colors and fine fabrics were for Esther neighbors to music and poetry. With slow precision and loving care she wove the gorgeous-hued woof, her thoughts intermingled with fancies concerning the far-away woman whose garment the silk once had been. In play Esther reconstructed the life of that stranger. She wondered how she spoke, what she said, how her existence was passed, and if her happiness were without bounds. The weaver christened the intense purple thread "Esther Damon," because once her own desire had been to wear similar stuffs. After all her office was merely to create objects of beauty for others.

Once in a rushing recollection of the transient phase of her innocent little vanities and of the scene of their existence, the purple thread deepened into black. Esther rested her head on the loom and gave way to sobs. Could she have altered her life she asked herself. No, her reason answered, she

could no more have altered her course of conduct than the strand of silk could resist the hand of the dyer; or the purple thread withstand the quick toss of her shuttle. Her weakness, her strength, were the woof pitched back and forth in the loom of her life.

When she resumed weaving, her eyes rested blankly on the window. She saw Orme pass from the buildings of the Republic, down through the forests of blooming orchards, up to the crown of the Hill of Difficulty. There was a slow return. Again he went. Again he doggedly repeated his course. While Esther watched him, her sense of sorrow for herself was transformed into pity for Robert. She became conscious of his danger. With reluctance her hands beat down the woof. Her shuttle moved no more. Her loom was motionless. The man before her who feared nothing was afraid of himself. He still knew the throb, the fever of the old vice. He was torn by invisible, destructive forces. She recalled with what complete devotion his broad shoulders had offered themselves for her burden. She seemed alien to her friend since he withheld from her his own unhappiness. Above all things she desired him to know that he might count on equal loyalty from her.

With bared head, her long black shawl falling from her shoulders, Esther went slowly through the beguiling, spring twilight. The thought, the emotion, the discipline of the years had informed both her outer and her inner life. As she moved among the

pinkening blossoms, as she waited for Orme at the foot of the hill, she showed rare perfected beauty. When he looked at her he would have prolonged the moment into eternity. He tried to speak fraternally, "I'm so glad you're better, Esther. I knew you'd take hold of yourself. No matter how high my belief in you is, you always justify it."

She saw that he was talking rapidly in order to prevent her noticing his own restless eyes and shaking hands. Once Orme had thrown a strong revealing light on the violence of these convulsions of temptation; but this was the first time she had seen them in their throes. Though he manfully tried to conceal his agitation, Esther perceived the certainty of defeat that had so pathetically marked him the day long before when they met at the tavern. The sight of him floundering in uncertainty transmuted her own weakness into strength. With a look of concern she answered, "But you, Robert, . . . you are not better."

"Never was better in my life," he said, lightly. She felt that she had endeavored to open a stranger's gate and it had slammed in her face. "So Aunty Brewster returns from the Exposition to-morrow," he went on. "Won't it be amusing to hear her?"

Esther would not be deflected into irrelevance. "Why didn't you come to me?" she asked quietly. "You are always helping me. Won't you let me be to you a little of what you were to me? Show me I can be your friend by telling me all . . . everything you endure. I want to remain with

you until your struggle is over. I can give as you have given. Put me to the test, Robert . . . try me."

Her hand touched his in a pledge of allegiance. Unrebuked he placed her fingers underneath his arm. He and she walked on in peace, unconscious of the sounds coming from a camp-meeting in the forest near the lake. "This is all I ask," he finally said. But neither his voice nor her ears had ever known such tender cadence.

"Why didn't you come to me, Robert?"

"I couldn't. You were alone. I should only have injured you."

That there was one person who would still protect her, renewed Esther's gratitude; yet she responded bitterly, "What do I matter?"

His answer was a look that vibrated new meaning. Then breathless and in silence, together they mounted the steep sides of the Hill of Difficulty. As they zigzagged across its face, in a pause during which she looked back to see how far they had come, she said, "It's very hard, isn't it, Robert?"

His eyes ranged over the tree tops, pinkish amber with sunset, before he quietly answered, "Very hard, . . . but it's life." Changing his tone he subjoined, "It's the first time you ever climbed to my hill-top, isn't it?"

"The very first."

When they had rested for a second he suggested, "Let's go on. It is beautiful up there. We can almost touch the clouds with our hands."

Again she took his arm, and while they ascended to the summit his hand clung to hers as to something with the saving power of redemption. To them looking down from its crest the hill seemed a gigantic bouquet on the highest spray of which they perched. No further word passed between them until they were seated on the green velvety cushion of grass under a tree stricken to the ground, but with one root in the earth, and like a tenacious old beauty still resolute to bloom. Then Orme turned to Esther his glance dazzling with the wonderful message, "It was easy to make that hard climb with you. . . ." The words so long clamoring at his lips for utterance came, "If it might always be with you."

For Esther it was as if a great new planet suddenly shone on her, and unable to receive its brightness, she closed her eyes. "Some things can't be, Robert." With her son no longer alive to screen from her the truth, she realized that, after remaining long in hiding, her love had come into the light. It surrounded her on every side. Even from the chamber of the dead came memories of Orme's voice, Orme's touch, which lived again. She did not stand off from reality. She was alive once more to her finger tips. Now she knew that death, like everything else, had united Robert and her, had flung them together on the edge of a flower-smothered precipice. "Don't say any more, Robert, please," she entreated.

But circumstances had so shaped themselves that

Orme's upbuilded will snapped like the dry branch he was nervously breaking. He was swayed by a mad master. "Why not, Esther? Who has a right to stand between us?"

"Don't!" she piteously appealed, but he was not to be subdued by a word.

"Let's break from it all. You saw just now what you do for me, Esther. Your touch, even your word saves me. You and I are on the same journey to the same port—happiness. . . . Let's find it together."

The truth of his words throbbed between them. The greatest peril of the man and woman was their sense of interwoven fate. Deep voices admonished that they were confronted with danger from which they should flee, but the sweetness of the moment sapped Esther's strength and she could scarce whisper, "No, Robert. . . . Don't speak."

Beneath his very eyes she was thinking, living rapidly. With exultation he saw that a change was taking place in her being. "I must . . . I tried to resist what I'm saying, Esther, but every day showed me I wasn't living. Neither of us is. We are buried up to our shoulders with only our minds free. We abandon nothing. The world isn't limited to this village. There are places where you'll learn to smile." Both her hands were in his as he bent over her bowed head. "Tell me, Esther . . . you can't live without me . . . I can't live without you."

Suddenly she threw her head backward like one about to swoon. "I need your love, Robert . . . I

need love, love, love. I'm famished, for love and happiness, . . . but it can't be. I want to love you with purity and sublimity no one else ever knew. Our love must be different from others as a rainbow is from a gray sky. . . . If it can't be like that, I don't wish to love you at all."

He did not know it, but she feared the wrath of God which she felt had always followed her in love.

"That's the way it is, Esther . . . different from the others as the rainbow from the gray sky. We'll go away from here. We'll forget sorrow. We'll lose ourselves in some beautiful solitude. Our entire existence will be love."

It seemed to Esther that every emotion she had felt was gathered in her heart. Her lips flowered in a smile. Her countenance was transfigured by a fresh illusion of happiness. "Do you really think so? Is it true? Will it always be true! . . . Tell me again."

"Always. I'd rather feel your pity than possess the love of all the women in the world. I've no life but in you. It has been true from the beginning of time. . . . It will always be true."

"And I must tell you," she replied rapidly, "I've always belonged to you ever since we spoke by the lake. . . . Perhaps even earlier it began. I couldn't have existed without you. All I see or know or feel is you, Robert. My life wouldn't have been worth living if it hadn't been for you. I can't live without you." Her head drooped, as though her words were stifling her. "I've denied my love . . . I closed my eyes to it like a coward, but I've put it behind

me for the last time. It must be good. . . . I feel reborn, pure, raised from the dead. Oh, my love, my life isn't worth very much, . . . what there is of it is yours." Her lips pressed his hand, his coat, his mouth. "This is the first time I ever kissed any one," she said.

Conscious only of their supreme moment, they clung together as if it must be cherished, prolonged, as if it contained their whole existence. "I've ceased to live in the flesh," she whispered. "I am spirit that knows nothing but you." As she shivered in his arms, her lips white as the petals on the ground, her soul seemed to become her body and her body her soul. "You must always be near me, Robert," she said in sudden terror.

He whispered in her ear all the sweet forbidden story of his love until she was smothered by its beauty; until both were intoxicated by it and each other; by the musky air; the witchery of twilight; by the countless blossoms turning their lips toward them. There was sublime delight in surrendering to the storm of their love; in being tossed by its billows to mountainous heights, even if in the end they should be lost in its depths, or find death on its rocks.

Suddenly Esther became aware that for some time she had been dimly conscious of shouts from the forest below. Following the sound with her eyes, she saw lights flaring in the trees. "Who is it, Robert, down there?" she asked. He offered no explanation, but there floated upward the echoes of song. "Why it's a camp-meeting!" she exclaimed.

Orme, his glance meditative, joyless, watched her as he deliberately put the test, "Yes, it's a Methodist camp-meeting."

There came the voice of prayer, and the moving, loving force of a hymn. Esther's mind took a backward flight. The voice of prayer and the hymn invoked the image of parents and home. Robert's eyes rested on her in alarm. For him there was omen in the falling blossoms, in the gathering clouds, in her gesture, which seemed to alter the meaning of their relation. It was as if evil entered their embrace, when Esther realized that below in the forest were men and women seeking selflessness, men and women seeking a heroic reason for living. The girl companioned them in their struggle. Once she, too, had dreamed of a life of self-sacrifice. With shamed eyes she demanded of herself what had become of her new morality, her new purity, her new faith? Where was her lost dignity? What in her was undefiled? To what could she hold fast? Then she showed on what anvil the iron of her will had been shaped. She withdrew from Robert's arms.

Orme, watching the mobile face he so well knew, saw the fabric of his happiness collapse through the crystallization of her strength. Insight came to Esther from some dominating power within, greater than herself, which saw what she could not see, knew what she could not know, made of her intended course a moral impossibility, told her that all was to end. Temptation was no more temptation. Something in her did not respond. She was no longer a

collection of impulses. She had become the kind of woman she was to be:

"Robert," she began, but her voice broke. "Robert . . . I lived for you. . . . I wanted to be perfect for you. I love you, . . . I can't debase our love. What are we if we aren't strong enough to give up ourselves for each other? . . . How often you've told me to renounce."

As he saw the flowering of the seed dropped by him Orme went from his best to his worst. His words turned traitors. His logic became the servant of his love. He repudiated all which had once lain nearest to him. "What are philosophy and wisdom, Esther? Ashes. . . . Not worth an hour of life. We shouldn't strain and distort nature in a struggle after the ideal. We weren't intended to give up so much. . . . Who cares if we renounce? I've denied myself until I feel like a monk in a cramped cell, eyes on the ground, avoiding temptation. I've done with it all. I want to stretch out my body and see the stars." In amazement she looked at him as he flung his head backward in the attitude of wanton, rebellious youth. His voice suddenly softened as he continued, "And you, my poor, dear Esther, you've had a life of suffering. What has the world for you alone? Sneers, scoffs, hatred. Will it help either of us? Of course not. Separated, we are merely living obituaries. Let's not lose our chance of being together. We've both gone to the bottom. We know everything. We belong together, Esther . . . you and I."

Orme was confronted by a piteously wounded,

startled face. "Is this you, Robert? . . . Why, you showed me such fine things . . . you don't mean this, do you?" she pleaded pathetically. "Don't mean it, Robert. . . . Let me adore you." She pressed his hands against her eyes, and after a choked pause continued, "We can't have each other. . . . I don't expect kindness from the world. I can't alter its opinions. It will always be the same for me. I know I've squandered the right to live as others live . . . only I don't want to do any more harm. . . . I want to save the good in you."

"You're all the good in me, Esther."

"No, no, Robert, . . . I'm afraid I'm the evil, but I love you. Your future is more than mine. . . . If I'm not your friend, my love is worse than hate. I can't take your life in my hands and crush it."

"You'll make my life, Esther. You can do anything with it you wish."

"What can I do for you, Robert, in comparison with what you can do for yourself? You told me that. Everything I know comes from you. I was a mere dwarf when we met, but . . . I try to remember what you said. What can we do for ourselves if our souls accept a bribe? If we degrade our love it will die. . . . It must live. That will be existence enough for me. Robert . . . we're living not only for now, but for other days."

"Other days!" Orme burst forth with a violence she had never seen in him. "What do I care about them? I'm living for this minute. Esther, that is the only way . . . to live with every fibre of our

beings, even with pain, but always with intensity." His reasoning became entirely passional as he proceeded, "There is no absolute right or wrong. Every right has been questioned, so has every wrong. We'll make our own morality."

She touched his hair, looked into his eyes and shook her head. "Right for us must be right for every one. I'd gladly give you my life . . . if you could take it without destroying yours. . . . You can't, Robert. You mean so much to others. Think of how the citizens believe in you. The world is beginning to notice the Republic. It has just been founded, but its influence will go far. What if at the beginning . . . the chief fails? Be brave."

"What does it matter what I am or what I do, if I can't have you? You are success, happiness, glory. All I can do is yours, Esther. I want to lose everything for you . . . I give everything to you."

"You can give me nothing, Robert . . . you can only destroy yourself."

Suddenly gathering her in his arms, he pleaded, "Don't take your love from me, Esther. Don't strike it dead. I need it desperately."

Once again the sounds came from below. She released herself and sat gazing at the forest. Without looking at Orme she murmured as if to herself, "What can our love ever be but an ideal? It's too beautiful to be experienced. There must be some other world than this for our love, but we'll always have all there is eternal in it."

With her words were born Orme's regret that long

before, while it was easily within his power, he had not laid in ruins her failing faith. It was on his lips to tell her that there was no eternity save that shared by the earth; the belief of those ignorant people shouting in the woods was fit for the simple-minded alone. Yet he could not bring himself to violate the devotion which had sustained her; and so he said, "But if there is no other world, dear. . . . Are you still willing to risk it?"

She moved a little away from him, "Yes, . . . even if we never meet again we shan't be separated. We'll be together more than if we saw each other daily. In the silence we'll know each belongs to the other until the end. . . . What more is there in life? Isn't that knowledge the only thing worth having?"

"I love you, Esther," was his only defence.

"Wherever I am, Robert . . . wherever you are . . . you'll always be with me."

But she spoke as if she were existing alone on the highest and most barren peak of life. Orme groped toward her, blinded with anguish. "Esther your face seems veiled. I don't see you. It isn't dark . . . but it's darkness to me. Have you gone?"

"No, I'm here," she said, kneeling beside him, encircling his shoulders with her arm.

"I've had only a moment of you and happiness, Esther. . . . Now you're both going away."

She held her face close to his. "No, I'll be always with you. . . . There'll never be a shadow or tear in our hearts . . . only happiness. Don't

you recall how those books you used to read from said that the slightest sound in space has no end?"

"Yes, Esther."

"Our words of love to-night will reverberate forever. . . . They'll go side by side through eternity together."

For a moment she crouched in his embrace, listened to his mad endearments; then she took him in her arms, pressed her lips to his forehead, his cheeks. When she touched his misty eyes he cried out, "You're doing this because you've already left me, Esther." She pressed and clung to him convulsively, and his will was blown about by his strongest desire. "Esther, you wanted me to test you . . . to prove you. I will. . . . Come to hell with me. I'm ready for any crime for you or with you. Your love isn't love unless you are."

Beautiful with terror she looked at him. Her face fell forward and rested on his knees. Orme felt the throbbing of her heart, as though it were naked. Between sobs she answered, "Don't doubt my love, Robert. You can't, but if you do . . ." In her gaze he saw stir the depths of her terrible temperament. "To prove myself . . . I'll go to hell with you."

His mind was too keen not to be accompanied by fine lucidity of conscience. He recognized the baseness of the test he had imposed. His own unworthiness laid hold of him. "I do believe you love me, Esther . . . I want you to be wholly happy, without a regret. Forgive me for being such a brute."

With a kind of awe he followed her movement to her feet. "Robert, don't speak of forgiveness. There can be nothing for me to forgive you. Think of what you did for the poor wreck I was. You gave me my words and strength to renounce. You gave me your soul. After that . . . I can't drag you down!"

Orme saw in Esther the finest expression of his own, lame spirit. "No, dear, you gave me yours. . . . If we were together you would take me higher and higher."

"No, lower and lower, Robert . . . and all your struggles would be useless. I'd destroy the belief of every one in you."

"I don't care for their belief."

"You mustn't mind if I say it is very dear to you. I want to stand aside and see it grow. Everything and every one will come to you." There was entreaty in her tone as she continued, "Robert, you'll be kind to yourself and . . . me. You'll not break down. You'll be strong."

He looked away from her. The old fear she had noticed when they had met earlier in the evening was in his voice. "You take from me all my strength . . . then you ask me to be strong."

"Robert, . . . I can live here only with you. then I ask you to be strong."

Gazing straight into her eyes he answered, "I'll try. I'll be the best I can if you expect it." Already in imagination he figured her as shut away from him by a barrier. "But what shall you do, Esther?

Won't you live where you are? If you wish it . . . we'll never speak; but remain near me."

"Robert, . . . I can live here only with you." . . . There's nothing for me but leaving. The roots of sin go deep . . . I know what it will be to destroy them. Here with you always present, I can never do it. Reminders must be avoided. I can't live in Freedom."

His glance swept over the earth. "Where shall you go?"

"Home to ask forgiveness of my father and mother. Perhaps they will let me live with them in Attica."

"Attica! Oh, you poor, dear, foolish girl. You can't endure that life. When you were a child you were always in rebellion. Now you've been free you can't go back to it."

"I don't want liberty, . . . I want peace."

"But Attica is a new martyrdom, Esther. Don't go. I can't bear the thought of it for you."

"You forget, Robert," she returned, with a sad, weary smile, "I've been up here on the Hill of Difficulty with you . . . among the lions that try men's souls. . . . I'm not afraid of martyrdoms."

One more moment they lingered face to face. In the presence of Esther's endurance, a bravery revived in Orme. "Do you wish me to go now, Esther?" he whispered.

As he asked the question a new, complete power of surrender rose in the girl, no strength remained her save for an inclination of the head. Bereft as

she was of the self-command to dismiss him, the difficulty of departure was reserved for Orme. Now she feared his touch, his last entreaty. But his tenderness for the weak showed itself. Mute and motionless, he perceived her vacillation; yet he uttered no syllable to urge an overthrow of her decision, nor a descent from her chosen high place of renunciation. In the end, when Robert turned away it was as if he died a little in the act.

She watched him lurch down the hill, and then she covered her eyes with her shawl.

CHAPTER XXIX

She had conquered her life. She had gained freedom through renunciation. But had she? Whatever should prove the value of her achievement, with such violent effort had it been effected that now, as Esther leaned against the tree—broken and bankrupt, her face thin, pinched with the ravages of travail—only the piteous empty shell of her remained and this at a touch might be crushed. Loving and living in the light, she had been suddenly stricken blind. She found herself in great fear, peering into the darkness, wondering if this darkness would last forever. She roused herself with the recollection of her promise to Orme that their love should be succeeded by something purer, braver, higher. Her one poor tatter of strength lay in her vow not to hinder him on his upward path. So in silence she stood, and made no sign for him to return.

Separated from Orme, Esther was still related to him. The air quivered with the color of love. He was there beside her. His face was close to hers. His words murmured in her ears. She clung to him. Held by his memory, she lingered until the voices ascending once more from the forest, quickened her realization that it was late and that Attica was eight miles distant. With the deepening dusk

came the thought that in Attica doors would open, but Robert would never enter them. Voices would sound, but his would never be present to soften strange harshnesses. Probing eyes would meet hers, but his gentle glance she should never see. The intervening blooming hills, the singing brooks, the smiling fields were a flat, gray waste. But yonder lay her world.

With shawl falling from her right arm, she hurried down the hill, across the orchard, as if passing from one strange dream to another yet more strange. Attica was the sole beckoning haven, and that, to her, was distant as another continent. She had no idea of the time her journey would take, but it did not matter. Nothing mattered. In the future, the sun would rise without a reason why. Absorbed, unconscious, she walked on, without fear, under the glittering stars. When she reached the dusty highway leading past the forest and lake, but untravelled by her in long eventful months, she moved with slow, reluctant feet. This was the road she had proscribed. The memory of the oft-traversed, disastrous thoroughfare caused her to shudder.

Soon Esther neared the tented forest resonant with the shouts of campers—old familiar sounds of her childhood. She stopped to listen. She would hear these in Attica. The wonderful, moving rhythm of the hymn," Rescue the Perishing" reverberated through the trees and recalled the day in church her mother had thrust a hymn-book in her hand. Oh! to be singing with the worshippers those words

in the old days so threadbare and lifeless, but now bearing a splendid, living message! Not since becoming an outcast had she sung, and Esther believed that if only she could sing she should not weep.

"Rescue the Perishing"—who better than she knew what it was to perish? Everything mortal touched by her had perished. Was there rescue for such as she? As she listened to the hackneyed syllables there played like lightning over her darkened soul the flash of the child-like, unquestioning, mighty, soul-saving faith of the Methodist church. Once more she felt the spell of old associations. Under their guidance she followed the wagon-road leading into the wood. Unknowing, she passed over the spot where she had yielded to the flood of her first love, where she had known its despair, where Robert had found her and had begun the cure of her soul.

The forest was filled with the crunching horses of campers who had come from neighboring counties. Through these she made her way until at last she saw the outer circle of the encampment surrounding the great, illuminated white tent from which issued words of praise. For two years she had not been in a church. Now the presence of so many people worshipping God among the trees inspired her with awe. The intonation of prayer frightened her. She would have retreated, but there lived in her the sense that she was perishing, and that, to live, she must come face to face with the Infinite. She needed no human heroes. She was beyond human help. Her

anguished heart and soul could not now find in the Stoics what Orme had found there. Only personal relation with the great heavenly Father of the old faith could bring peace to her soul. Terrified by even the melancholy hoot of an owl she dared go no farther until she kneeled down upon some branches and tried to pray. The words remained inarticulate upon her lips. A mighty power seemed to mock her.

Weary and agitated she rose and proceeded toward the large tent which seemed lighted with flame. All the worshippers were within. She was so close to the canvas that she touched it. Through an aperture she observed a throng of familiar faces seen by her since a child at camp-meetings. Brother Simpkins was on his feet saying, "Dear sinner friends, pray. Jesus is trying to save you. He came to call sinners, not the righteous, to repentance. It don't matter whether your prayers are fixed up in grammatical style or not. Pray!"

Only the phrase "dear sinner friends" remained with Esther. How few had been her friends, how few had not sought her destruction. She so longed to lay her head on the bosom of a friend that the ignorant, simple-hearted old man seemed the very angel of the Lord. Could these people make a friend of her? Esther moved toward the side of the tent, crawled under the rope supporting it, and her face framed in her shawl, she crept out into the open. Her dread was that all would stare at her as on that last day in her father's church.

Brother Simpkins looked as if he had seen an apparition; but, on account of the confusion and enthusiasm of devotion, her presence was not immediately noticed. Seated on the platform which served as a pulpit were the ministers of Elder Damon's conference. Esther was glad her father was not among them, but she read in his absence a resolution not to touch the skirts of Freedom. She stood for a second before she ventured to place herself on the last bench protruding from the tent. Here she was alone. During the exhortation, Esther detected covert glances cast in her direction, and the pain resulting penetrated even her spiritual distress.

The speaker was a young minister unknown to Esther; Elder Shackelford, of Cleveland. He had the Roman features, the glowing personality, the intensity of voice and manner so often in the old days found among Methodist ministers. After song and prayer he announced his text: "He that converteth a sinner from the error of his ways shall save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins." During his discourse the preacher urged, "Conquer through Jesus, my young friends. Conquer through Him who with spears piercing His sides, nails tearing His flesh died loving you and me—not only you, the spotless, the righteous, the born saved, but you poor, weak, black-hearted sinner. It's you who need Him."

The minister had much native, uncultivated ability. His earnest, appealing manner warmed and illumined his words. To Esther it seemed that

Elder Shackelford, rising on his toes as he made a sharp motion with his index finger, pointed directly at her. This impression did not lift as he proceeded, "Let not life nor death, nor things present, nor things to come, nor any creature separate you; you—" With quick gestures the speaker pointed to certain unregenerate young people, "from Christ Jesus who lives in the heart of each of you. God gave us the blessed Jesus. We should give ourselves to Him."

Should she? Could one who had sinned so wofully as she? To Esther it seemed that long before her soul had died, and this minute was shocked back to life to see itself a withered, twisted, seared thing in which survived only a deep longing to return to God. In His love she was bathed. He knew the truth of her—wayward and unhappy. And though she had put away her love for Robert, through the lens of its intensely living spirit, for the first time, she realized the boundless love of her Creator and the selflessness of Him who gave His life to teach men how to live. Her finite love was so real a fragment of the Infinite that there was no longer a chasm between her and her Maker. God's mysteries were mysteries no more. The faith never grasped, even questioned, almost rejected by Esther, was now entirely hers.

Elder Shackelford did not long exhort the young people. He soon passed to the motive for his presence at the camp-meeting. "My brethren and sisters, you not only have a duty to yourselves, but

to the entire fallen race. You are charged to carry the healing gospel unto all the world. Jesus came not only to save you in Freedom, but the poor people in China, India, Africa. Don't shirk the difficulties, hardships and perils of those brave Christians who consecrate their lives to the salvation of the heathen over the sea."

The minister was not a great evangelist, but he spoke at a crisis in Esther's life. She glowed to his words. He described a post in the New Hebrides so girt with danger to health and life that years since it had been abandoned. "I'll tell you a secret, young people," Elder Shackelford said, bending forward and speaking in a whisper: "I wouldn't admit it to many. I'm ashamed to say it. I've been trying for years to find a Christian man or woman so filled with the spirit of the Master as to go out to this post in the New Hebrides. I can't. Not one. Don't you blush for the Christian of today? What must Jesus think of us, the theological descendants of John Wesley, who preached while ignorant men stoned him? Aren't you ashamed to call yourselves Christians? You're cowards. What is life here in comfort when there is the sacrificial death of the missionary to be died?"

Elder Shackelford had an intimate, personal form of address. He appealed to several of the children of the clergy and of the conspicuously devout laymen to offer themselves. But they, shamed of countenance, shook their heads. Deep in the sweets of youth they had no years to throw away. Esther,

meanwhile, sat nervously moistening her lips—her white, rigid hands clasped, her excited eyes half closed. She leaned forward, listening in an ecstasy of self-abandonment, repeating Brother Shackelford's question, "What is life in comfort while there is the sacrificial death of the missionary?" The suggestion passed into her blood. Agitation showed itself in her swaying body. To put half the world between Robert and her, and then to lend the faded, ragged remnant of her days to whomsoever had need of her—what was nobler?

Elder Shackelford renewed his appeal. Esther looked about anxiously, fearing there should be one to wrest from her the opportunity for atonement. Hymns were sung to stir courage, to incite the young people to sacrifice. The girl sat, her face buried in her hands, so shaken as to imagine her emotion had passed into the spirit of those surrounding her, and that all were burning to accept the Great Commission.

"No wonder the Holy Ghost don't come down on these meetings," came the reproachful rich-toned voice of Elder Shackelford. "No wonder your hearts don't break up. You're thinking of your comfortable homes, your crops, your money. Jesus's is the only work neglected. Do you call yourselves Christians when you refuse to be the first—the very first, to tell the great story? Think of what it means to be the very first to tell the greatest story of history." He looked about him with disgust, and then said with severity, "Oh, you prefer grabbing and grubbing to the work of Peter and Paul. Have

you ever thought why they're such sublime figures? Because they loved Jesus so much that they weren't afraid of death." Elder Shackelford then sang a stanza of the hymn "From Greenland's icy mountains to India's coral strands." After a dramatic pause, with a sharp contrast of quietude, he said, "For the last time, I ask, is there one willing to accept this service?"

Esther rose unsteadily, her eyes overflowing with tears. Now no mortal ties could withhold her from the summons of her childhood religion. When its seed had been implanted in her nature she could not have said; but, in this moment, she realized that when she had thought herself farthest removed from her belief, then was she nearest. Her darkest disobediences, her darkest despairs, her darkest sins —all had contributed to the growth of the faith which now mastered and shook her. The girl scarce knew her voice for her own as she said, "Here I am. Will you take me? I'll go."

"God bless the sister! God bless the sister! Amen! amen! Hallelujah! hallelujah!" the minister shouted. Then he covered his face with a handkerchief, while he offered a silent prayer of gratitude. A minute later he clapped his hands. Elder Shackelford was a stranger to this conference, and so no unpleasant recollection was revived in his mind by Esther's offer. "There's a soldier for the heavenly camp—a woman, too. Come right forward, Sister." He stepped down from the pulpit, held out both hands to greet the volunteer. "This is a glorious

beginning. Now, isn't there some one else? You brothers won't let the sister go alone."

Elder Shackelford then sang the Doxology. Not until he finished did he realize the community of astonishment possessing the audience. Even the most impassioned, demonstrative saints of the Lord were voiceless, motionless. Only those on their knees exhorting others still lost in the wilderness of error, were unaware of the extraordinary occurrence which hushed Brother and Sister Simpkins. Swept down the aisle by a terrible ecstasy of self-immolation, Esther herself was not conscious of the prevailing amazement, nor of the presence of her father and mother. Elder and Mrs. Damon, kneeling far to the right, pleading with one unregenerate, had not seen their daughter. The girl did not hear the whispers of the sisters nor note the hurried conference among the ministers. Her reason and mental pride humbled, immersed in sweet spiritual peace, she kneeled down in the straw covering the ground before the altar—a long, thick, rough plank. "Oh, Jesus, teach me how to be like my mother," was all she asked.

She did not realize that the young girls at her side shrank from her. For them the woman who bathed the feet of Jesus with her tears was a dim, Biblical figure. Their movement made an opening in the throng of penitents seeking salvation. In this space Esther remained, her head fallen limp to the altar.

Sister Simpkins, apparently delegated to express

the feminine sentiment of the evening, approached Esther. "I'm sorry, Esther," she whispered, "but the sisters don't think it's just right for you to be here amongst these young girls. You can go out quietly . . . folks won't understand why."

Esther thought she had woven for herself a covering of steel to shield her from the thrusts of the world. But now its hard, firm surface was pierced, and a new, tender sensibility beneath it quivered. "I forgot, I forgot," she stammered, as she fixed the sister with eyes in which were the depths of night, "Perhaps you're right . . . I shouldn't be here."

In a daze she looked about her. Though because of its loss Esther valued innocence higher than did her persecutors, she recognized the error as hers. She had been too indelibly branded ever again to be welcomed by her sex. She should have known conventional decency was not her portion. These unlettered folk, unmindful of the universal nature of error, would have stoned her. They understood only the small, tepid sins—the sins of the bright feather, of secret societies—not the sins which cause Heaven to shudder. Her bespotted life eclipsed their vision, and when she wished to leave it there was none to care for her soul. She had rejected temptation, she reflected, but she had crucified and rejected Jesus until she was undesired by the Infinite. She could pray long and labor until her heart broke, but she was not a chosen vessel of mercy. She had wasted her life. Her soul and Heaven were lost.

Blighted and dishonored, Esther rose, and passed from the tent. But so wide a perturbation did she make in her environment that all looked at the tall, supple figure, the pallid cheeks, the staring, burning eyes, as at a strange creature in a dream. For the first time, many of those present beheld a scarlet woman.

CHAPTER XXX

In her passage from the altar down the aisle Elder Shackelford endeavored to speak with Esther; but, gazing straight ahead, she went on. Unless she made haste she felt that something within her would burst out into a horrible shriek. She had known every vain hope, every treachery, every cruelty, and her final rejection by the women of the church made her feel again that the wrath of God had fallen upon her. She had sinned until she was an unclean thing. She had sinned the unforgivable sin.

Her spirit was in the lowest pit of despair as she held her course away from the voices of prayer, from the lights, into the darkness. She could see no path, and she followed none. She longed to lose herself in the forest like one of its leaves, to work out her spiritual destiny.

The startled rabbits and squirrels fled at her approach as if she were a huntress. Bewildered by the falling stars, by the distant thunder, she stumbled at times, but, mindless of her hands scratched with brambles, she picked herself up. Once, unable to move, she lay prostrate on the damp earth. She had come to a place named Gethsemane. How miserable was life when suffering such as that of those in this Garden was permitted. But sud-

denly it came to her as an arrow straight from the unerring bow of truth that the Divine One had not driven her from Him. It was His blinded, misguided children. Their faith, petrified into a shell of superstition, had estranged from their hearts the gentleness, beauty and charity of their Master. When Esther considered their poverty of intelligence and of experience, pity welled up to her dumb lips for those cramped, fettered people in the tent. Such as they in their blindness persecuted even the Son of Man. Those better than they slept while their anguished Master prayed alone that last night under the silver-green, gnarled, olive trees in the Garden.

Esther saw Him now. Her ardent fancy rejected traditional, insipid conceptions of Jesus. It wrought its own image of Him. For her never was He so sublime as when after His prayers, His struggles with His human self, in supreme majesty, He rose above His carnal nature—at last the calm conqueror. She beheld Him turn to His derelict disciples and heard Him cry aloud to them, "Sleep on!" The realization of His magnificent victory, His splendid emancipation from human limitations, made Esther's breath come fast. lifted her to her feet as she imagined the Man of Sorrows in His triumph had risen. When she faced the tent, she too would have cried, "Sleep on in your ignorance. I'll make my peace not with you, but with my Maker."

In new strength she retraced her steps, determined with all the youth in her blood this very

hour to achieve the supreme faith. But, in time gone, she had left so much of herself in the forest that now its flaming image confronted her, importuned her, tempted her. When her courage seemed at its flood she was caught in an undertow which would have carried her backward. Her love was not dead. It survived, greater than her faith. It was the only undying, divine faith. Why should she not follow it? Despite her fierce severance of herself from her love she was still a woman. Did not her highest womanhood lie in love? Why renounce it? It was so hard for Esther to die to the old existence behind her. It was so hard to live to the new existence before. In this crisis life was one long temptation. With arrogant habit and intensity, dead vanities, dead sins renewed themselves; entreated her not to desert them; admonished she could not live without their delight.

Feeling all against her, Esther could advance no farther. So great was the torment of killing the flesh that she fell upon her knees and held out her hands; but God turned away His face. When she endeavored to speak, her tongue clove to her jaws. A cold hand choked back her words. Two lives, one evil and the other righteous, grappled for dominion of her consciousness. She thought herself abandoned, dying. She feared to die without confessing her ill deeds. This agitated, tore her, bereft her of her voice, until in abrupt screams there rushed from her torrents of meaning in words dipped in her own blood.

"Oh, Jesus, I'm perishing. Save me. My mother taught me to trust Thee, dear Jesus. I know I've been forgetful . . . I've rebelled . . . I've hardened my heart to Thee . . . I've doubted Thee . . . I've provoked Thee to anger . . . I've been evil, blessed Jesus. I loved Thy creatures when I should have loved Thee. I loved my faults. . . . My sins seemed beautiful. I've no right to expect Thy favor, my Father, but Thou art the God of the poor, the desperate, the broken-hearted. I'm lost . . . and Thou didst die for poor sinners like me."

She prayed as she had loved. All that was purest, noblest in her life went into her plea. Rent by her yearning she lifted her white, woful face to the sky. The black, ominous cloud which obscured the heavens was like a veil before her Father's countenance—a veil not to be pierced by her supplications. Esther's heart was so swollen with prayer that her pulses ached, but she went on lashing herself with a scourge of words. "Forget my terrible sins, blessed Jesus. Show me Thy face even if it kills me. . . . I shall die if I don't see Thee. If I am not worthy to look at Thee, O Lord, punish me. . . . I know I have struck at Thee. . . . Strike at me with all Thy power."

Pitching and tossing in the anguish of penitence, Esther was unaware that those within the great tent had heard her voice, and that she was surrounded by a score of worshippers. Knowledge of this first came to the girl when she felt the familiar touch of her mother's hand on her head. Mrs. Damon was

kneeling by her side. "It's I, your mother, . . . dear Esther. Your father is here, too." The prayerful old eyes of the mother gazed into those of the daughter. Patient, gnarled hands stroked the girl's head.

While the sight of Esther in her penitence softened Elder Damon, swept his heart clear of anger, it left him bewildered. He was not yet wholly prepared to accept her redemption. He was still constrained to withhold the parental blessing. He stood in silence by the crushed prisoner of earth. Mrs. Damon, on the other hand, had lived so long in her own heart the highest spiritual truths of the Master, that in this hour for which she had fasted and prayed she enfolded her daughter in her embrace. "Jesus will not spurn you, my child," her soft, quavering tone comforted. "He promised to give to those who asked. You shall not be driven from God's altar. Let us go back to the mourner's bench together."

Mrs. Damon endeavored to lift the girl, but Esther had no will to rise. Still prostrate, she poured her soul out on her mother's bosom, "Oh, mother, forgive me, forgive me."

"Of course, of course," Mrs. Damon soothed.

For a moment the past seemed to drop away from Esther. The stain was washed away from the soul. Once more she was a happy child in her mother's arms. But as she realized peace had not come, despair overwhelmed her. "God won't forgive me, He has forsaken me," she moaned. "There isn't any mercy. I'm too wicked."

Mrs. Damon held her face close to that of Esther. "No, no, my poor, dear lamb. No one is entirely pure. . . . Even lilies grow in mire. Jesus loves you. He is waiting to forgive. Didn't He promise it in my vision? He endured the cross for you. He'll give you rest. Kneel here beside me, dear. We'll pray together."

Side by side they knelt, the mother's arm encircling the waist of the daughter. Her lips burning with divine love, again Esther sought the God of her childhood. "Jesus, Jesus, merciful Jesus. Come to me, dear Jesus. Show me Thy face or let me die now."

The eyes of Mrs. Damon filled with light as she supplicated, "Breathe on Esther, Holy Spirit. Let the fires of God come down upon her. She's nothing without Thee."

"Amen, amen," intoned Elder Damon, for the first time breaking the silence.

Even the trees and the night seemed to pray with Esther. The far-away God came nearer. To all witnesses it was as if He descended from heaven to help the girl lift her cross. From the shadows of the trees dusky figures approached closer and closer, a kindly re-enforcement to the suppliant. Esther Damon's words were as sparks. They enkindled the listeners. The men and women knelt and sang a hymn. To the confused mind of the penitent these worshippers were a cloud of strengthening angels. Once more she raised her distressful countenance to the overcast heavens. In the strength

of her terrible despair, she thought in flashes of fire. Her words were no longer her words. "Help me, Oh Father. Thou art all-powerful. . . . Purify me. . . . Free me, blessed Jesus, and my hands shall toil for Thee, my feet shall walk for Thee, my tongue shall speak for Thee, at no matter what cost. The rack. The stake. The poisoned arrow. Thy will be done."

Suddenly the heavens were luminous with a light brighter than light. Clearly outlined in the sky was a cross of clouds. For the over-heated imaginations of Esther and of all these simple worshippers, it was as if they stood in the very presence of the Almighty. The girl liberated herself from her mother. Flinging out her arms, she emitted a passionate cry of redemption which rang through the glade like a baptismal fire, "Oh, Jesus, I am no longer blind. . . . I have seen Thee. I feel the strength to save the world." And indeed, in the crisis of revelation, her unbound hair streaming over her shoulders like a mantle of fire, she seemed a creature of miraculous favor. She seemed pre-appointed to transport and regenerate mankind.

After such visible manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit there came a moment of breathless awe. Then ineffable songs of joy filled the air. Through the medium of Esther Damon, whose sin had been graven on their hearts with pen of iron and point of diamond, the worshippers believed that they had seen nature suspend its laws. They had beheld the dream ladder leading to heaven.

Elder Damon choked with sobs as he realized that in acceptance of service his erring child had outrun him. He touched his daughter and said, "You have the power to save the world . . . if you but believe it. Let us three go to the New Hebrides together." Holding Esther by the hand he led the shouting, singing, praying concourse of people back to the deserted tent of worship. As he passed down the aisle, in a thundering voice he cried, "I've a message from God." It was bliss to Esther once more to have the love and approval of her parents; but she did not need their support. She walked in the power of the spirit.

The worshippers were so stirred by this unexpected, wondrous spectacle in lost, unregenerate Freedom that all restraint was abandoned. Cries without ceasing shook the quivering crowd. Their joy was deeper over Esther's once despaired-of soul, this moment freed from peril, than had there always been hope for the girl or her danger less. For the first time since the camp-meeting began, barriers to the salvation of souls fell away like the walls of Jericho. Melted, unified by the fire sweeping over their spirits, men, women, and children were reduced into one being, burning with the consuming love of God.

"The world is coming home to Jesus," cried Brother Shackelford as old ministers burst into tears. Preachers darted out into the crowd exhorting sinners to go to the altar. The sisters who had driven Esther away in turn became suppliants for her forgiveness. They embraced her and fell upon their

knees. Many of the unregenerate, unable to withstand the hurricane of ecstatic fire laying low the congregation, and determined to escape prayer, fled toward the forest; but in the darkness under the trees they gave way. Some cried aloud for mercy. Others wept for joy. And loud wailing prayers for sinners mounted to heaven. It was faith of the early heroic days when the new belief stirred the world.

"Christ is a blessed Christ," cried Sister Simpkins, as she went out into the darkness to seek the unregenerate. "Don't make your bed in hell. Hell is trembling."

Brother Simpkins hurled his purse to the altar, confessing at the top of his voice, "I've cheated the Lord. Jesus forgive me. All my idols have passed away." Some of the unsaved women cast their bracelets, their rings, into the straw. Others, in vehement atonement, tore from their apparel feathers, flowers, buckles, lace, fringe—every symbol not in His name. Bearing witness to the strengthening of the weak and the deliverance of the tempted, cold, dead souls were made alive to Jesus. The great deep in hearts was broken by the infection of the fierce Pentacostal spirit which passed over them, bent them, mastered them until it was like faith gone mad.

Now at the altar, Esther had ascended her Calvary. She stood as at the foot of the Cross, her extraordinary beauty of countenance reflecting the light shining from her fervent spirit. Another form of consciousness of which until the present moment she

had been unaware, possessed her. The Esther of old had vanished. She was touched by no sorrow, no stress. Her fall had been her leap. All this travail had been necessary to bring her to God.

So great was her desire to adore that which can never be gauged, named, or known that she bent her knees in the straw. Like a fluid thing she melted in prayer of thanksgiving that she was no longer a solitary being; that all other forms of realization had passed; that she had found the Eternal, screened by seeming reality; that at last she was at one with all purity, all truth, with Absolute love.

On vibrating wings, she seemed to be whirled upward, but in the culmination of her life so great was her prostration of being that her head fell to the earth. Where she sank, there she lay, outstretched, in the straw.

CHAPTER XXXI

DURING the succeeding years, travellers, students, dreamers—all those rising to breathe the pure, high air of a nobler development of civilization—found their way to the shy, retired village made known to fame by Robert Orme's miniature Republic. Many of the world's weary here long lingered, renewed their spiritual forces, gathered momentum for life. They were happy in the economic and social experiment, despite their apprehension that it was but a brilliant bubble on the illimitable gray surface of ignorance—one preappointed to lapse into the all-pervading element from which it rose.

But in misgivings for their beloved new order the hundreds of loyal citizens of the Republic had no share. They saw its boundaries widen until these included the lake and forest and stretched far beyond. Relieved of the brutal, mechanical monotony which develops mere beasts of burden, the citizens in their wholesome, rational lives, felt themselves to be the men of the future. These dwellers in Utopia did not believe that equality, brotherhood, and love would be permanently submerged by injustice, plutocracy, and hatred. They held to their faith that their numbers would grow until one day a great army of super-men should surge through life, wipe away every tear, right every wrong, and illumine the

sordid soul of their century with the spirit of true democracy. Their leader gave so largely of his own strength and love to his comrades that each man forgot he reflected a great personality. He felt himself to be Robert Orme.

Owing to Robert's refusal to modify his controlling idea, the original purpose of the Republic was not lost in the material prosperity against which it had been founded in protest. The spirit of fraternity prevailed because he asked of another no service from which he himself shrank. There were neither masters nor servants in the community. Each day Orme continued to exact of himself the discipline of manual labor, and so he learned thoroughly the beautiful handicrafts which were the distinction of the Republic. He was foremost, also, in constructing the new buildings scattered throughout the orchard. His spade broke the ground for the stone chapel which crowned the Hill of Difficulty. He laid out the walk winding round the hill thereto. He planted the grapevines forming the arbor which shelters the path.

When the plodding villagers, blinking contentedly as they trod their narrow furrows of life—reluctantly, as becomes representatives of conservatism and solidity—at length realized themselves to be living in a rapidly growing village which hourly communicated with Ripon by public conveyance, they attributed their new prosperity to a belated recognition of their own virtues. But when the post-office was enlarged and they were obliged to double their purchase of merchandise to meet the requirements of the Republic, judgment of Orme relaxed in rigidity.

The philosophers of the Four Corners guessed maybe the devil wasn't so black as he was painted. However, only after most of them had passed away, did a more modern and a kindlier generation see Robert sufficiently in perspective to understand his purpose. They shared his larger, newer vision. They cooperated in his work. Gradually most of the villagers became either citizens of the Republic or were dependent on its handicrafts.

Mrs. Brewster was the last of her contemporaries to leave life. She survived even Alice Orme, who died one winter after being for ten years the richest and most respected woman in the village. She left her fortune to foreign missions. Frequently on the arm of Robert, Mrs. Brewster mounted to the chapel on the Hill of Difficulty where she heard him speak so well that her critical genius had only one regret; he was not a Universalist minister.

Slowly it came over the valiant widow that with each day drew near an universal, invincible foe. On the occasion of Robert's last visit, sitting upright in her rocking-chair, her arms crossed over a blue checked apron, in a premonitory moment she remarked with feeble voice that even the soldiers of the Revolution had to die. When Orme bent over her to utter an encouraging word she touched his head for the last time and said, "You poor boy, your face is kindo' young, but your hair is as white as mine. I've lived most a hundred years, and I've had pie on the table every meal. Keep the flag flying when I'm gone."

After Mrs. Brewster's burial a curious and char-

acteristic testament revealed that she had bequeathed her house and possessions to Esther Damon. When this information stirred the silence and the peace that had gathered over the ill-fated woman's disgrace, her name was mentioned by the older inhabitants with reverence accorded the supernatural. Among the devout of Freedom it was believed that on the night of her conversion she had had a vision of a world veiled from mortals. Esther had never returned to Freedom after she went to the new Hebrides with her parents, and her coming was awaited with awe. Determined that none of her substance should be wasted on yellow foreigners, Mrs. Brewster had made Esther's inheritance contingent upon her occupancy of the house. Should she refuse to comply with the terms of the bequest, so ran the words of the document, the said properties and moneys should be given to Robert Orme.

For nearly a generation the house remained vacant. Orme laid no claim to his legacy, and Esther Damon still walked the way of the apostles. Following Mrs. Brewster's injunction, Robert renewed the flag when it was faded, and each spring stirred the loam at the roots of the hollyhocks, peonies, and roses.

Nothing interrupted this routine until one tranquil evening when the orchards were in bloom, by the last stage from Ripon, there arrived a traveller in dusky garments. A lame hostler still lounged before the Ivy Green, and white-haired philosophers congregated on the Four Corners; but to the new-comer all faces

were unfamiliar. She looked about her like one who missed what she sought.

Proceeding down the main thoroughfare, she saw enlarged, altered houses and countenances with which she was unacquainted. She encountered a group of hatless, buxom, rosy maidens strolling arm in arm. For an instant she forgot that in grim expiation she had left her youth over the seas. She paused and started to speak with the girls, only to find them strangers. Their young minds were unawakened to meanings in faces, but they stopped chattering to gaze after the phantom-like being whose eyes were so like a flame, and the soul shining therefrom of such exquisite fairness that the woman herself seemed of a substance different from any known to them. It was not for these thoughtless on-lookers to realize the mysterious correspondence between her and the place where she had lived and suffered. Nor could they know that at every slow step the stranger was confronted by a tragic, passionate image of youth. With her progress the brave woman who had sorrowed, served, and proved herself in supreme, consecrated loyalty, wandered farther into an unfamiliar country.

When she came to the gate of Mrs. Brewster she looked in alarm at the new buildings erected in the orchard. Had time left nothing unaltered? Yes, the house before her. Here was one untransformed friend to offer greeting. The flag was still flying from the roof. The same blossoms saluted her in radiant May beauty, called out to her to pluck them.

She herself was of the color of that white hyacinth which to-morrow would die. She hastened up the walk, tapped nervously at the door. There was no response, and the meaning of the silence renewed itself. For a moment she clung to the knob, but soon she passed over the threshold.

At last the dear, homely sitting-room with its quaint pictures, gleaming coal-stove, round table covered with a red spread—everything welcomed her. When her glance fell upon the loom, she sprang forward, tenderly laid hands thereon as if it breathed and had being. And for her had it not? How often had she communed with it. How often had it been to her a solace and a deliverance. She sank into her old familiar seat, and resting her thin, lovely, aging face on her hands she recalled the afternoon she had gone away. When she saw the purple thread, undulled by time, a blur gathered over the loom, causing it to appear distorted, as if viewed beneath water. She raised her head to steady her vision. Before her was an apple-tree, rugged and gnarled as an oak, but joyous as the tenderest lily in its bloom, like unto the white illusion bridal-veil of spring.

And yet this was not what she saw. Eager youth once more in his eyes, Orme was moving toward her through the orchard. Esther took up the shuttle that had been so long in waiting.

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